

A Destiny Rewritten

rubyblue13

Abandoned



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Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
chapter i: the mission.
chapter ii: chasing ghosts.
chapter iii: the dark truth.
chapter iv: the princess.
chapter v: alderaan's fate.
chapter vi: the rescue.
chapter vii: master and apprentice.
chapter viii: the son.
chapter ix: bloodlines.
chapter x: the battle of yavin.
chapter xi: cymoon-1, part i.
chapter xii: cymoon-1, part ii.
chapter xiii: skywalker.
chapter xiv: the bounty hunter.

Summary

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Description:

(Discontinued) In which Padmé Amidala lives.

After Padmé gave birth to the Skywalker twins, to prevent her from dying, she was frozen in a special carbonite chamber for twelve years to rejuvenate her health. Padmé was awakened by Obi-Wan Kenobi and Bail Organa seven years ago, and decided to join the Rebel Alliance's fight against the Empire. She has become one of the leaders of the Rebel Alliance, but remains in the shadows to protect herself and her children from the Empire and from Darth Vader. But when Padmé and Leia embark on a mission to Tatooine to bring Obi-Wan Kenobi to Alderaan to aid them in their struggle with the Empire, she catches a certain Sith Lord's attention.

*3 main ships: Padmé/Vader | Anakin, Han/Leia, and Luke/Original male character. This fic also includes Jedi!Leia. Note that this fic is posted on AO3 as well. And obviously, this is a fanfic, so I don't own these characters, or Star Wars.

chapter i: the mission.

Alderaan is nothing like Naboo, but it is certainly just as beautiful. Padmé Amidala watches the snow gently fall from the overcast sky from her bedroom window. Bail is still asleep, but she has been awake for a few minutes now. As leaders of the Rebel Alliance, they have a great deal of work to do today.

But for now, Padmé stands with her arms folded across her chest, contemplating as she stares blankly out the tall window that looks into the courtyard. She is dressed in an elegant, silken lavender nightgown that pools down to the floor, and her dark hair falls in loose ringlets down her back. For more nights than she can count, she has shared a bed with Bail Organa, who was once her good friend, but now her lover. Other than Anakin, he was the only man she had ever felt safe and comfortable with. And if it were any other day but today, Padmé would have woken up feeling elated, but instead, her spirit feels crushed, just like it does every time this specific anniversary comes around: the day she and Anakin were married. It would have been their twenty-second.

Instead, he is dead, and Padmé is with Bail. Not that she resents her relationship with the King of Alderaan, and it is not that she doesn't love Bail. In her mind, she knows that she would be wasting her life away if she spent the rest of it alone and mourning him. But in her heart, Padmé knows that Anakin was her soulmate. It didn't matter how much she loved Bail; nothing would ever change that. So rather, she will spend her life with Bail and mourn him.

She would have cried if she were alone, but she doesn't want to wake Bail. If she did, she would have to explain, and... she didn't want him to think that he wasn't enough for her. So instead, she swallows her tears, and plays with the japor snippet that hangs around her neck, the one Anakin gave her when he was a boy.

The pain of losing him is still intense for her. To Padmé, only seven standard years have passed since the last time she saw Anakin alive, even though in reality, it has been nineteen long years. In order to save her from dying in childbirth, she was frozen in carbonite for twelve years. Slowly, she was rejuvenated enough to be awakened, and when she finally did rise from her slumber, she was thrown into a world without the love of her life. It was Bail Organa and Obi-Wan Kenobi who greeted her in her hospital room and explained that Anakin had been killed by a fellow Sith Lord named Darth Vader, another one of Palpatine's apprentices.

Seven years have passed since Padmé's awakening; biologically, and mentally, she is only thirty-four years old, since she did not age a single day while in her carbonite chamber. She should be forty-six, or dead at twenty-seven. (Padmé is just glad that it wasn't the latter.) And although Padmé has been awake for a long time now, the galaxy is still strange to her. Seeing Bail so much older, forty-eight years old now, seeing his hair slowly gray while hers stays the same chestnut brown. The same goes for everyone that Padmé knew before the Empire's insurrection. Time has gone by too quickly; losing twelve years can take a toll on a person. Part of her doesn't believe that nineteen years have gone by; she would like to believe that it would take less time to overthrow the Empire.

Her greatest regret is that she was not able to raise her children. When she met Leia, she was already twelve years old, and had an established mother figure, Breha Organa, Bail's former wife and the Queen of Alderaan. However, by the time Padmé awakened, Breha was dead, killed by Imperials when Leia was eight. If anything, Padmé was not a true mother figure to Leia, but a replacement for Breha. But at least she was accepted by Leia into her life; that was the most important thing to Padmé.

Luke, on the other hand, she was never allowed to see. The only reason Padmé could see Leia was because she chose to join the Rebel Alliance. Obi-Wan convinced her that she must keep her distance from Luke; it was already dangerous enough that she would be a part of Leia's life.

"If Darth Vader ever found you, or your children, he would hunt you, Luke, and Leia to the ends of galaxy."

"Why?" Padmé had asked.

"He would sense the power within your children," Obi-Wan explained. "And if he knew that you were their mother, I'm sure he would use you to draw Luke and Leia into a trap."

Darth Vader was the reason that Padmé lost her husband once and for all. It was bad enough that Anakin turned to the Dark Side before he died, but it was even worse that his betrayal is what got him killed. Vader was Palpatine's other apprentice, and now, his only one. She had no doubt that Obi-Wan was telling the truth; from what she knows, Darth Vader is a ruthless man with no regard for any life other than his own whatsoever.

She had no doubt that Owen and Beru Lars were taking good care of Luke, and that Obi-Wan was protecting him, but still, she has always wanted to meet her son. She can imagine him now, blue-eyed like Anakin, light hair kissed by the sun, staring out into the Tatooine sunset like his father had once done...

The soft caress of Bail's hands on Padmé's hips shatters her thoughts and pulls her back into reality. He presses into her, embracing her from behind. Padmé returns the gesture and smiles as Bail plants a kiss on her cheek.

"Good morning," he says, his voice low and scratchy from his drowsiness. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not for very long," Padmé replies. "I was just admiring the Alderaanian mountains." She looks out into the window, where the mountain range, covered with snow and tinted blue by the clouds, can be seen in the distance.

"Someday," Bail says softly, "Alderaan will be yours, just as it is mine." He implies marriage with what he says—an idea Padmé wouldn't normally be opposed to, but today, on her twenty—second wedding anniversary with Anakin, it is difficult to think about marrying another man.

"And when will that be?" she inquires.

"When we defeat the Empire," he replies. "When it's finally safe for you to show yourself to the public."

"If the Emperor and his lackey knew I was alive..." Padmé trails off, her mind distant.

“But they never will,” Bail finishes her sentence for her. “They’ll be gone by the time we’re married, and you’re the Queen of Alderaan.”

It was a nice thought—married to Bail, the Empire gone from the galaxy. The memory of Anakin still tugs at her mind, but Padmé entertains Bail’s ideas nevertheless. “And we’d be politicians again. Politicians of the Galactic *Republic*.”

“Leia would still be Senator of Alderaan, and you’d be the Chancellor,” Bail muses. “I would work with Leia, but spend most of my time ruling Alderaan.”

“The Chancellor?” Padmé laughs softly. “Like Palpatine?”

“You’d be an amazing Chancellor. I can’t imagine anyone better to fill the position.”

“You’re too sweet,” she says with a warm smile. Padmé turns around and kisses Bail gently on the lips. It is nothing like kissing Anakin. Bail is soft and gentle, while Anakin was much more passionate and intense, and sometimes rather rough and demanding.

He is still embracing her when he pulls his lips away. “While I would love to stay like this, I believe we should head down to the meeting room.”

“You’re right,” Padmé sighs. She isn’t sure if she is relieved or disappointed that they have to leave. “We wouldn’t want to keep Leia waiting for too long.”

Bail steps away from her and smiles. “Yes, she can be quite impatient sometimes.”

She reminds me of Anakin, Padmé thinks, but she doesn’t say it aloud. Though Bail knows Leia is Anakin and Padmé’s daughter, neither of them voice that very often. Not only is it an explosive secret, but also, there is no need to discuss it. Anakin has been dead for nineteen years, while Bail has been Leia’s father figure all this time.

Padmé and Bail are now dressed and walking down the corridor to the meeting room. Bail wears his usual clothing, a gray-blue suit with a silver belt and a dark navy cape. He always wears simple, but regal clothes, and keeps his dark hair very neat and carefully brushed. Padmé’s clothing is much more extravagant; she wears a long sapphire-blue dress with elegant gold designs along the sides of the skirt and covering the sleeves to her wrists. The japor snippet still hangs around her neck, as it always does; and her hair is still long and flowing in loose ringlets down her back. She didn’t have time to have her hair done as she normally would for an event, but this is just a simple meeting with her daughter and a few other distinguished rebels.

The doors to the meeting room slide open, revealing Leia, Mon Mothma, and Admiral Ackbar. Leia looks so much like Padmé, but she has her father’s spirit. She has her mother’s eyes and her mother’s hair, but she has his fire and his raw power in the Force. However, like her mother, Leia is already a skilled politician and excels in diplomacy.

She has grown so beautiful and strong; it fills Padmé with pride to see her meeting with rebel leaders as not just a member, but a leader herself. She is more than a beautiful princess; she is a warrior, a soldier, and a general.

Her hair is done up in her signature buns on either side of her head, and her lips are stained rose with lipstick. Leia's dress is long and white, with a silver belt to accentuate her waist. She smiles at Padmé and Bail when she sees them and stands from her seat on one of the white sofas. Mon Mothma and Ackbar mirror her.

"Welcome," says Mon. Once Padmé and Bail take their seats across from them, the three of the other rebel leaders sit down, too.

"So," Bail begins, turning his gaze to Leia. "Are you going to explain why you called this meeting?"

Leia nods confidently. "Yes," she replies. "I wanted to discuss if it was possible for me to lead the mission to Tatooine."

Padmé raises her eyebrows. Immediately, her motherly instincts kick in. "It would be... very dangerous," she says. "I know you're capable, but I worry."

Her daughter smiles at her warmly. It doesn't comfort Padmé like it normally would; to think of her daughter being so close to harm's way made her more anxious than she could describe in words. If Leia was discovered... she doesn't even want to think about it. The thought of her falling into Darth Vader's hands twists knots into Padmé's stomach, knowing what would happen to her if she found herself in an Imperial prison.

"I believe General Leia has proven herself to be very proficient in leading missions," Admiral Ackbar chimes in. "I have no doubt in her abilities; she's never let us down before."

Leia smiles at him. "Thank you, Admiral Ackbar."

"I agree," Mon Mothma says. "Leia can be trusted to lead the mission to retrieve Master Kenobi."

"I'm hesitant to allow my daughter to go on such a dangerous mission... with the tensions with the Empire running this high, there is a chance they will intercept her," Bail considers. "If Padmé agrees, then I approve."

Leia looks at her mother expectantly, and Padmé knows that she cannot deny Leia the opportunity to lead such an important mission. But then she weighs in something else, something that would make her feel much more secure in sending Leia to the Outer Rim.

"I will sign off on it, *if*—" Padmé begins. She glances at Leia to see that anxiety has flickered over her face at Padmé's words. "If I may accompany her. Kenobi is an old friend of mine, and I know the area he lives in fairly well."

And maybe, she thinks to herself, just maybe, I could see Luke just once. She hasn't laid eyes on her son since he was born, and it kills her. It hurts her down to her core and twists her heart into a mangled mess.

Everyone nods in agreement, except for Bail. He casts a worried look at Padmé, fearing the worst for both his daughter and for the woman he loves.

"I have no doubt that you can handle yourself," he tells her. 'But please be careful, Leia, Padmé.' Bail looks from his daughter to Padmé and then back again. "And come back in one piece, both of you—that's an order." He smiles weakly; Padmé can see that he doesn't truly approve of putting not just one, but both of the most important people in his life in danger.

But this is what they signed up for when they became rebels, and Bail knows this as well as Padmé does.

“So, it’s settled, then?” Leia asks hopefully.

Bail nods. “Yes. I agree. Padmé and Leia will embark on the mission to Tatooine together.”

In a few weeks’ time, Padmé and Leia find themselves on the *Tantive IV*. It is a small corvette ship that is attached to a larger cruiser. They are accompanied by several other ships, ordered by Bail to ensure their safety. There could not be a more perilous time to venture so far out into space, and especially to a planet controlled by no faction. The Empire was dead set on closing in on the Rebel Alliance, and Padmé just hopes that the entire fleet will be able to make it to Tatooine. The best-case scenario would be that Padmé would see her son and return safely home to Alderaan with Obi-Wan. And the worst-case scenario...

Well, she didn’t really want to consider that.

Padmé and Leia are standing on the bridge of the *Tantive IV*, staring out into space. Leia is wearing her white dress with the silver belt again, and her hair is in those double buns. Padmé also wears simple clothing; a form-fitting white bodysuit with beige boots and a beige belt and cape to match, similar to the outfit she wore on Geonosis many years ago. She often draws inspiration from her older outfits, from a different era of the galaxy. Her outfit from Geonosis, and her hair from Mustafar—she wears it in the same long braid with the two thick braided buns at the base of her head. Padmé’s makeup is minimal, since there’s a chance she might have to be in combat today, but she does wear lip gloss, mascara, and neutral brown eyeshadow colors on her lids.

“Do you think—” Leia begins, but then several Imperial Star Destroyers jump out of light space right beside the fleet of rebels.

“Mother of moons,” says Padmé under her breath. She turns to Leia, her eyes wide and frantic.

“Padmé...” Suddenly, Leia becomes very tense. Her hands clench into fists at her side, and her brows furrow. Padmé isn’t sure if it’s anger or fear on her face, or both. “That’s Vader’s Star Destroyer. *The Devastator*.”

“Oh,” replies Padmé. She draws in a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but the panic has already set in. She doesn’t let it show, but if she was less composed and less brave, perhaps she would be running off to an escape pod by now. Padmé would never leave the rest of the crew on the ship behind, and there is still hope to reach Tatooine. They weren’t very far off now, and if the Empire was just a few hours later, they would have made it.

Her heart is beating a million miles an hour, but her voice remains calm although the rest of her is not. “We have to detach from the cruiser,” she says. “The rest of the fleet could distract the Star Destroyers while we slip away to Tatooine.”

“Fuck,” Leia curses. ‘I hate it,’ she continues. “But I know you’re right.”

If they weren’t in such a dangerous situation, Padmé might have said, “You don’t hate anything, Leia.” But it isn’t the time for her motherly worries. It is the time for action.

Padmé looks out the windshield of the ship again, to see that the Star Destroyers have released a swarm of TIE fighters into space. They fire on the cruiser that the *Tantive IV* is attached to, and the ship trembles slightly beneath their feet.

“Tell the captain to flee,” Padmé instructs a nearby commander. “Now!” He follows her orders, running towards the captain’s station.

“Padmé,” Leia turns to her mother, urgency in her eyes. “If we’re captured...”

“Don’t talk like that,” she almost snaps in response. “We’re not going to be captured. We can’t—we—”

“But you know it’s possible,” says Leia.

“I know,” Padmé replies with a nod. Her voice is full of certainty, but fear creeps into her voice and sends a tremor through her words. She is more afraid for Leia than for herself; she wouldn’t know what to do if her daughter fell into the hands of the Empire.

A soldier rushes up to Leia and Padmé, breaking into their conversation. “General Organa, General Amidala,” he says, heaving from running. “The cruiser has been boarded by Imperials. Darth... Darth Vader is with them.” His face pales at the Sith Lord’s name, and Padmé hopes that this poor man won’t end up among the dead.

“Vader personally boarded the ship?” Padmé says in disbelief. “I thought that was normally just left up to his lackeys.”

“Not this time, General Amidala,” the soldier says. “He seems very adamant about ensuring that our mission fails.”

Just as the soldier finishes his sentence, the *Tantive IV* detaches from the large cruiser and blasts into space. Once the ship maneuvers away from the onslaught of TIE fighters, it jumps into lightspeed, leaving the Imperial forces behind.

For several minutes, it is calm, and the *Tantive IV* continues as normal to Tatooine. Padmé is displeased about leaving their fellow rebels behind, but she knows that it was for the best. Their mission *must* succeed. She can’t imagine how they would defeat two Sith without a Jedi Master on their side, at this dire point in the war.

It isn’t long before another messenger approaches Leia and Padmé with a card in his hand, which appears to be an information chip. “One of the men from the cruiser passed this along,” he tells them.

Leia takes it in her hand and gasps. She looks up at Padmé, excitement in her eyes—something she didn’t think she would see after their run in with the Empire.

“What did they send us?” Padmé asks.

“*Hope*,” Leia replies. “It’s the Death Star plans. I can’t believe they did it—they really got them.” Her lips curl into a smile as her fingers close protectively around the chip.

“I thought retrieving the plans was an impossible mission,” says Padmé.

“Apparently not... this is remarkable. The team that acquired it must have given their lives to obtain this,” Leia tells her mother. “These plans, combined with Kenobi... Padmé, we

might really be able to win this war.” She’s beaming now, first at the data chip and now at Padmé. Her eyes are lit up with joy and Padmé can’t help but notice how her smile looks so much like her father’s.

She wants to smile, wants to revel in Leia’s enthusiasm with her, but Padmé believes it is too late to celebrate. First, they have to get away from the Empire; there is still a chance they could be caught up to.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Padmé advises.

“I know, I know,” agrees Leia. Her smile vanishes, but it still touches her eyes. She tucks the chip into the pocket of her dress, and she and Padmé begin to review their plan to bring Obi-Wan to Alderaan.

But hours later, once they can see Tatooine from the windshield of the *Tantive IV*, trouble arises. Padmé, admittedly, was starting to get too hopeful; she should have put those thoughts away, because it’s even more crushing than it normally would be when she sees the three Star Destroyers appear out of light space.

And this time, they have no backup. The only shot they may have is that the *Tantive IV* is considerably faster than the Star Destroyers, but they would be easily slowed down by their firepower.

“Leia,” Padmé says, urgency clear in her voice.

“I know,” she replies. “The plans.”

“We’re not going to make it,” Padmé tells her daughter seriously. “We could try to get to the escape pods, but...”

“I have a better idea,” her daughter says. “Follow me.”

As TIE fighters and Star Destroyers rain down fire on the fleeing *Tantive IV*, Padmé and Leia quickly walk from the bridge into the main corridor that goes down the rest of the ship. They would have darted, but people are already panicking, and if they saw their generals running and hiding, it would absolutely crush their men’s morale. As Leia passes by rebel soldiers, she instructs them to position themselves in the corridor and prepare for a boarding party. Padmé and Leia can both feel the ship shaking under the fire of the Imperial forces, and they know they won’t last long.

After a few minutes of walking, Padmé and Leia arrive in a small room that the main hallway leads to. R2-D2 is standing there, and he greets the two women with a few cheerful beeping noises. Just then, the ship

“Hello, Artoo,” Padmé says. The ship trembles again and Padmé’s stomach twists nervously, but she doesn’t let her fear show through.

“Artoo, we need a favor,” Leia tells the droid, but it is more of an order than a request. She explains the situation to the droid, and asks it to find 3-PO and launch the two droids in an escape pod with the Death Star plans to Tatooine. R2 agrees, and then Leia gives the droid further instructions to find Ben Kenobi and play a message for him.

Padmé stands aside for her to record her message. R2 begins recording, and Leia explains that the *Tantive IV* has fallen under attack. She mentions that the mission has failed—a truth

that Padmé loathes, but a truth that is undeniable at this point. Leia asks Obi-Wan to come to Alderaan and deliver the plans to Bail Organa, and Padmé wonders if she will ever see him again. It is unlikely, considering she will probably become an Imperial prisoner in a few moments.

Leia ends the message with, “Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.” Those words twist a knife into Padmé’s chest—*her only hope*. She prays to whatever is out there, whether it be the Force or some kind of deity, that if not her, then Leia, will come out of this alive. She prays that the Rebellion will not falter, even with their mission failure.

After Leia inserts the plans into R2, the recording ends. “Go, Artoo,” Leia commands the droid. “Find Threepio and the nearest escape pod.”

The droid beeps several times in response, but it is not an aggressive sound as it normally is. It is soft, sympathetic almost.

“I know, Artoo,” says Leia. “We’ll be alright. Just focus on getting the plans to Kenobi.”

Once Artoo glides away, Padmé turns to Leia. “Come on,” she tells her. “Let’s find a better hiding place.”

“Just get your blaster ready,” says Leia, resting her hand on the black blaster strapped to her belt. As her daughter speaks, the ship rumbles, but much more severely this time.

“They’re here,” Padmé comments, more to herself than to Leia.

Another violent rumble indicates that the boarding party must be even closer now; Darth Vader must be on his way. The alarms on the *Tantive IV* blare, and red lights begin to flash.

Padmé glances at the elegant Nubian blaster on her holster, the same one she used for years. If her blaster failed her, luckily, she kept lockpicks in a hidden pocket inside of her boot. That trick had saved her before when her life was on the line as a senator, and if she is captured, perhaps it would save her again.

Without saying anything more to one another, both Leia and Padmé break into a run down the back hallway. She glances into the main corridor to see that several rebel soldiers are in position, blasters raised and poised to fight. They are all going to die, and Padmé knows it. She and Leia might, too. But that is the sacrifice they all agreed to when they joined the Rebel Alliance; they all knew it could come to this.

Padmé looks again, but immediately regrets it. She can see the door to the ship from a distance, and the sparks flying all around its outline. The boarding party is coming through, and she knows that with a sinking feeling, Darth Vader is with them. She has heard countless horror stories about the Dark Lord of the Sith, how he broke necks with one raise of his hand and severed heads with one sweep of his lightsaber. There is a brutality in him that is beyond words, a darkness that is beyond comprehension.

A loud explosion makes Padmé flinch; the door must have been blown open, allowing the boarding party to come through. *This is it*, she thinks. *This is really it*.

She and Leia find a storage room in back hallways and crouch behind its opening. There is no door to the room, but Padmé doesn’t think a simple sliding door would stop the Empire anyway. They look at one another as the sound of blasters can be heard from the main hall.

Men begin to yell, and Padmé just hopes that the men dying are the Stormtroopers and not the rebels.

The noises continue for several minutes, and then it goes mostly quiet, except for some remaining blaster sounds, but they have become more distant, meaning that the rebels must be retreating.

Leia reaches out and holds Padmé's hand for comfort. Her breathing has become slightly heavier; she is likely trying to control her fear. "It's okay, Leia," her mother tries to comfort her, but even she is not completely calm. Her heartbeat has accelerated and her hand has become sweaty around her blaster; her nerves are slowly getting to her. It is difficult to be fearless when your life is hanging on such a fragile thread.

They hear footsteps coming near them, and both the women go utterly silent. Padmé and Leia exchange a glance, knowing they will have to fight. They nod at one another and rise from their crouched positions. Leia pokes her head out slightly to see the Stormtroopers searching the back hall, and Padmé follows.

They are quickly spotted by one of the troopers. "There's two! Set for stun!" he commands.

Set for stun—Darth Vader must want them alive to be interrogated. Padmé isn't sure if she'd rather die a mostly painless death right here, right now, or endure the agony Imperial interrogation with a slim chance to escape. A very, very slim chance indeed.

Her daughter raises her weapon and fires; Padmé does the same. Together, they take down two troopers, but more four still remain. The two of them begin to run, but one of the Stormtroopers fire at Leia, and she falls to the floor. Padmé stops dead in her tracks and grabs her daughter with one arm and fires at the trooper who shot her with the other. He goes down, but then so does Padmé—another one is able to stun her, and she finds herself on the floor like Leia. Still awake, but unable to move. It is the most powerless feeling in the world, knowing that her daughter is stunned on the ground and there is nothing she can do prevent them Stormtroopers from picking them up and dragging them out of the back hallway.

"Inform Lord Vader we have prisoners," says one of the Stormtroopers to one of his comrades. "And bring us more men. I have a feeling these two might be difficult to handle."

They place handcuffs around their wrists, rendering them even more powerless than they already were. *We're really in for it, now*, Padmé thinks to herself. If she could, she would run her thumb over her jaw snippet; it is a nervous habit of hers, and the memory of her late husband is always comforting. But the Empire doesn't allow comfort—something Padmé will have to get used to.

Slowly, as the Stormtrooper guides Padmé into the main hall, her senses begin to return. More Stormtroopers join them, and soon enough, Leia and Padmé are being marched down the corridor. Now that they are able to move, Leia and Padmé exchange a nervous glance. Padmé is absolutely stricken with terror down to her very core, but she refuses to allow that emotion to cross her face. Especially not in front of Darth Vader, the man who killed her husband.

"Where are you taking us?" Padmé asks the Stormtroopers.

One of them replies, “To Lord Vader.”

chapter ii: chasing ghosts.

Her heart stops the moment she lays eyes on him. The infamous Dark Lord of the Sith stands only a few feet away from her, and if she had the choice, she would have been paralyzed in fear. However, the Stormtroopers continue to march she and Leia forward. Padmé hesitates for a moment, but she is prodded back into movement by the trooper behind her.

Padmé does not like being afraid; it makes her feel weak, and she has never considered herself to be a weak woman. But it was difficult to control such a strong emotion like fear when she was in the presence of one of the darkest beings in the galaxy. Darth Vader—slayer of rebels, murderer of the innocent. She has only seen him in holograms, never in person. She has only heard stories; and she had hoped that they would just remain *stories*, never become a reality.

But there she is, standing before him.

Vader's back is turned to her when they approach. He seems deep in discussion with one of his commanders, but he must sense them, or hear them, because he turns around once they are closer. His breathing is heavy and mechanical, distorted by his mask, just as Padmé's fellow rebels had described to her.

He is a tall man, dressed in a dark suit with a cape. That infamous black mask covers his face, concealing all emotion. Vader has always been quite the mystery; no one knows who he was before he became Darth Vader, if he ever had a different identity. There are speculations as to why he wears the mask; some say that he is horribly disfigured, that he has no face at all, that it hides his true identity, and Padmé has even heard that he is not even a man, but just a droid programmed by the Emperor.

He appears to freeze when he sees them. Vader makes no move towards them, but rather, he waits for the Stormtroopers to bring Padmé and Leia closer. Once they are standing face to face, he still says nothing, does nothing. Padmé's entire body has gone rigid and she feels as if she is made of ice; she wishes that he would just say something, *anything*, rather than leave her in suspense. She expected him to yell at them, chastise them for being rebels, demand information. But he just *stands there*.

If he was going to speak, Leia does it before he can get a word out.

"Darth Vader, only you could be so bold," she remarks bravely. Padmé knows that Leia must be terrified on the inside, but she certainly hides it well. Her eyes are full of fire and hatred—a look Padmé had seen in Anakin's eyes the last time she saw him on the blazing planet of Mustafar.

"*Leia...*" Padmé warns, but her daughter brushes her off. Darth Vader crosses his arms defensively; she wonders what is beneath that mask, if his features are stoic or full of rage. Padmé cannot tell if he is looking at her or at Leia, or perhaps switching between both. All she sees is herself reflected in his blank stare.

“The Imperial Senate will not sit still for this,” continues Leia, her voice much sterner now. “When they hear you’ve attacked a diplomatic—”

Darth Vader is quick to cut her off. “Don’t act so surprised, *Your Highness*,” he snaps. His voice is so harsh that it almost makes Padmé jump. She had heard that Vader spoke with a very mechanical voice, but it sounded so much *crueler* than she ever imagined. He truly is a menacing man—or machine, whatever he is.

“You weren’t on any mercy mission this time,” Darth Vader continues. “Several transmissions were beamed to this ship by rebel spies. I—”

Now it is Padmé’s turn to interject. “We didn’t receive any transmissions,” she asserts. Her heart beat jumps into acceleration as Vader’s head turns away from Leia and his gaze rests on her. “The *Tantive IV* is just a consular ship.”

Darth Vader goes utterly silent, save for the sound of his breathing. Leia looks at Padmé in confusion, but Padmé doesn’t break away her gaze from Vader. She waits for him to speak, but as the moments go by, she too becomes confused by his reaction. It is almost as if she shut him down with her words.

Growing impatient and even more anxious, Padmé speaks once more. “But I suppose attacking an innocent ship isn’t abnormal for someone as vile as you, *Vader*.”

He replies this time, his voice low. “This is no innocent ship... *Amidala*.”

“A-Amidala?” Padmé repeats. She tries to compose herself, but she doesn’t think that will save her if Vader knows who she is. “You must be mistaken—”

“There is no use lying to me,” he tells her. “I know who you are. So, you are a member of the Rebel Alliance, then?” Perhaps Padmé was imagining things, but Darth Vader’s voice seemed less harsh than it did before.

“We’re on a diplomatic mission to—” Padmé begins, but Vader cuts her off.

“Everyone on this ship has said the exact same thing,” he says. “But no one can tell me what happened to the plans the rebel spies sent here.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Leia retorts. “I’m a member of the *Imperial Senate* on a *diplomatic mission* to Alderaan.”

“You are part of the Rebel Alliance, and a *traitor*!” he retaliates. The anger and the harshness quickly returns to Vader’s voice at Leia’s words. “*Take her away!*”

The Stormtroopers begin to push Leia and Padmé towards the exit of the ship, but Vader stops them. “No,” he commands. “Take the *princess* away. Leave the other rebel here.”

“What?” Leia protests. Half of the Stormtroopers begin leading her away, while the other half remains flanking Padmé. She begins to struggle, but it isn’t to any avail, as she is outnumbered and her hands are bound. “No! Let me go! I’m not leaving her with *him*!”

Padmé moves to try to comfort her daughter, but she is held back by one of the Stormtroopers. “Leia—” but then her voice breaks. Where are they taking her daughter? To be tortured? To be *killed*? Any of those ideas made her feel absolutely sick.

“Padmé!” Leia yells, still struggling, but the Stormtroopers persist, leading her out the door into Darth Vader’s Star Destroyer, *The Devastator*.

Once her daughter disappears, Padmé turns back to Vader and scowls at him. “You have quite the nerve,” she ridicules him. “What is the meaning of this?”

“You seem more reasonable than the princess,” he tells her. “Perhaps you can be convinced to tell me the truth. I already know the Death Star plans were sent here. I already know this is a rebel ship.”

“I don’t know *anything* about Death Star plans,” Padmé repeats the same thing she and Leia and every other passenger has already told him. “There’s a reason why you haven’t found them: they’re not here. We don’t have them.” Technically speaking, it wasn’t a lie. The plans should be safely on their way to Tatooine now, inside of R2-D2’s storage compartment.

Vader shakes his head. “Then where are they?” Once again, his voice has softened. He does not yell at her like he did to Leia, does not snap or retort.

“Even if I did know, I would never tell you,” Padmé says.

“Why? Because you’re a rebel?”

She doesn’t confirm or deny that fact, but she does say, “Because I *hate* you.” It isn’t a lie. She does hate Darth Vader—in fact, he, along with the Emperor, are the only people Padmé has truly *hated*. They are viler, crueler, and more heartless than the Separatists were. Vader is more brutal than Count Dooku ever was, and more so than Darth Maul, too. He murdered her husband, he helped Palpatine destroy the Republic that she loved so dearly. He has killed thousands of her allies, ripped apart innocent planets in the name of justice. Padmé has just met the man, but she has hated him for years. She has never truly come to grips with that until now, until she finally faced him.

“I’ll die before I tell you anything,” she tells him, her voice firm and certain.

“You are not going to be executed,” he replies calmly. She expected him to retaliate like he did to Leia before; Darth Vader, of all people, reacts *calmly* when she openly defies him? It was unbelievable. “I will continue this conversation later, but I have matters to attend to,” he tells Padmé.

Vader then turns his gaze upon the Stormtroopers. “I want her taken to one of the empty quarters on my floor,” he instructs them. Padmé furrows her brow in confusion. *What?*

“Not to a cell, sir?” questions one of the Stormtroopers.

“No,” he replies.

The commander that Vader was talking to earlier has been silent for a long time, so silent that Padmé didn’t really notice him. But now he pipes up, “She isn’t going to be... interrogated?”

At least Padmé isn’t the only one who is confused. It seems that her situation is different from other prisoners, and she thinks she knows why. There is a chance that Darth Vader could know about her relationship with Anakin. If they were Palpatine’s apprentices together, Anakin may have shared that information, or perhaps it slipped out somehow... Otherwise, she can’t think of another reason why Vader wouldn’t send her to a cell. But still, that didn’t

explain why he doesn't plan on interrogating her. Not that she is disappointed, especially since interrogation implies torture, she certainly finds it odd.

"I don't want her harmed," Darth Vader explains. "Next time you question my authority, I will not be so forgiving," he threatens his men. "Now, do as I say."

And they do; the Stormtroopers lead her away. Before Padmé disappears behind the exit, she casts one more curious glance at Darth Vader.

His heart stopped the moment he laid eyes on her. Padmé is alive—it was really her, after all these years. He doesn't know how it is possible, but she was standing right in front of him only moments ago. Darth Vader has hardly felt anything but rage, hatred, and contempt for nearly twenty years. He has been hardened by his own brutality; he has allowed darkness to overgrow within him to the point that it has taken him over, completely corrupted every fiber of his being, right down to his soul.

But there's something that blooms in that darkness now. He can feel it, an undeniable warmth in an ice-cold wasteland. It's her—it's *Padmé*.

Darth Vader didn't what to do. He had frozen when he first saw her; at first, he wasn't sure if Padmé knew who he is, but it was confirmed to him that she didn't once she called him vile. She regarded him as a complete stranger, as a *monster*.

He didn't mind it when other rebels called him such names, but from Padmé, that was a low blow.

Vader is beyond shocked and dumbfounded that Padmé had spoken to him that way. But surely, if she knew that he was once Anakin Skywalker, she wouldn't despise him so deeply. There is a part of him that enjoys her hatred, that relishes seeing anger on her—just not directed at him.

There is no doubt that Obi-Wan and the rebels have poisoned her mind. She must have been lied to, twisted into believing that he is something he's not. She must have been lied to about what happened to Anakin, too, otherwise, she would have known who he is.

But he did notice something else during their conversation. Padmé was still wearing the japor snippet necklace he made for her when he was just a boy, indicating that she hasn't quite let go of Anakin. If he approached her, revealed his true identity...

And then what? He ponders. The last time he saw Padmé... he doesn't even want to think about that. He remembers all too well, the fires of Mustafar, Padmé's pleas, her eyes watering with tears. Vader had believed that he killed her that day, but he was wrong. That fact changes everything—nineteen years of heavy guilt suddenly felt almost light as a feather, and most importantly, that the Emperor *lied* to him. Or perhaps he did truly believe that Padmé was dead... but even then, he still would have lied about him killing her in his anger. It simply does not add up to him, and it makes his blood boil with rage.

Vader turns and begins to walk down the main passageway, and his commander follows him. "My lord," he says. "Holding the princess is dangerous. What if this gets out? It could generate sympathy for the Rebellion in the Senate."

"I have traced the rebel spies to her," Vader explains as they continue to walk. "Now she is my strongest link to finding their secret base."

"She'll die before she tells you anything," argues the commander.

For once, he is unsure about executing this particular rebel. During his conversation with Padmé and the Princess of Alderaan, he could sense a deep connection between the two of them. Padmé would likely be livid with him if he killed Leia Organa.

After nineteen years, he still cares for his first and only love. If he took away someone she loves, not only would it pain her, but it would also have consequences for him. He doesn't want to lose Padmé again, which means that he will have to convince her to join him... it would be quite the difficult task, knowing her, if he killed one of her cherished friends.

He has wanted to kill that insolent girl for years; she has been a thorn in his side for too far long. Princess Leia *deserves* to die for everything she has done to defy the Empire, but Padmé would not see it that way.

"Leave that to me, Commander," orders Vader. "Send a distress signal, and then inform the Senate that all aboard were killed."

The two of them are then stopped by another Imperial. "Lord Vader," the man greets him. "The battle station's plans are not aboard this ship, and no transmissions were made. An escape pod was jettisoned during the fighting, but no life forms were aboard."

Droids, Vader thinks. Padmé and the princess are quite clever.

"They must have hidden the plans in the escape pod," suggests Vader. He turns to the commander and orders, "Send a detachment down to retrieve them. See to it personally, Commander. There will be no one to stop us this time."

"Yes, sir," replies the commander. The other officer leaves, and they continue to walk. Vader expects the commander to stop following him, but he continues to linger. "My lord, I am curious."

"Yes, Commander?" Vader decides to tolerate his inquiries, though his patience is beginning to run thin.

"What of the woman?" he pries. "The other rebel?"

"I will find out more about her," replies Vader. He is careful with his words, not wanting to reveal his true relation to Padmé or his intentions with her. "I knew her in the days of the Old Republic. Interrogation methods won't suffice for her... I have a different approach. I trust that you believe I am capable of doing what is necessary."

"Of course, my Lord."

Leia paces anxiously in her cell. She already knows that she is being taken to the Death Star; her fate is practically sealed at this point. But Padmé... what is going happen to her? She wasn't sent with Leia to the prison, and she hasn't heard anyone walk through these hallways since she got here.

Maybe Padmé is already dead and she just doesn't know it. *Anything* would be better than that possibility, but Leia can't think of another one.

Is Vader torturing her right now? Is he choking the life out of her like he has done to so many others? Every time she tries to think of a different fate for Padmé, death is all she can come up with. It simply doesn't make sense otherwise why Padmé hasn't been brought to the prison like Leia.

She takes in a deep breath, but she just can't steady herself. Not when the woman she has been thinking of as a mother for seven years might be dead.

Suddenly, Leia's cell door opens, revealing the dark figure of Vader. He walks into her cell, the doors closing behind him as his arms fold across his chest.

She won't let her fear show through. Not for the fear for herself, and not her fear for Padmé, either. She refuses to give Vader the satisfaction. "No torture device?" Leia remarks boldly. "Don't tell me you've gone soft, Vader."

"No torture device *yet*, Your Highness," he replies coolly. "I am not here to discuss the location of the rebel base."

"Then what are you here for?" she inquires, genuinely curious. Leia can't think of any other reason that would bring Vader to her cell.

"What is your relationship to Padmé Amidala?" he asks her. "And answer me honestly, or I *will* return with a torture device. Or, better yet, I could save time and choke you until you tell me."

Leia scowls at him, anger surging within her in a great wave of fire. "There's nothing you can do to me that would make me betray Padmé."

"That almost answers my question," Vader gloats. "So, you care for her. Very deeply, I can sense, and now you've just confirmed it verbally. Now, describe to me, your *exact* relationship to her."

She narrows her eyes. So, Padmé isn't dead after all—relief washes over her, but it is short lived. She isn't dead, but what does Vader want with her? What interest could he possibly have in her relationship to Padmé?

"Why do you care?" she tries to deflect the question rather than answer it.

"That is of no concern to you," is all he says in response. "I am growing impatient, Your Highness." He uses her royal title so sarcastically, so sourly, as if it is a cruel joke.

Leia says nothing. She has a bad feeling about this; anything she tells him could be used against her or Padmé, and the last thing she wants to do is put Padmé's life in jeopardy, more than it already is.

So screw Vader, she decides. He won't be getting anything out of her—not about Padmé, and not about the rebel base.

"Silence, then?" he growls. "Perhaps I could bring Padmé and the torture device into your cell, and demonstrate how exactly I'm going to torture you once we reach the Death Star."

She shakes her head. Vader is already using her connection to Padmé against her, but she doesn't take his words lightly. Darth Vader is not at all shy to violence, and Leia has no doubt that he may very well do exactly what he suggests he may do.

Vader can hurt Leia all he wants, but if he hurt Padmé...

"I—" she begins, but then her voice breaks off. Leia is uncertain of what to do. If all Vader wants is information about she and Padmé's relationship, would it truly hurt the Rebel Alliance? If she gave in, would she be helping Padmé, or hurting her?

"You don't need to hurt her," Leia says. "Padmé is an innocent in all of this."

"*Explain,*" he commands.

Leia slowly begins to formulate a plan in her mind, a plan that both gives Vader what he wants and could also help protect Padmé at the same time.

"She isn't a rebel," Leia lies. "Padmé was only with me on the mission because she's... almost my step-mother, in a way."

"Your *step-mother*?" he repeats. Vader's tone is flatter than usual, but Leia cannot tell if it is simply lack of emotion or irritation. She can never read Vader, not with his mask covering his face.

"She took care of me after my mother died, and she and my father are together," Leia explains.

Vader goes silent, but Leia sees his gloved hands curl into fists. After a few moments, he relaxes them, but she has a feeling that what she said did not go over well with him. She just hopes he doesn't decide to hurt Padmé, as he had threatened before.

Tension continues to rise within Leia as the Sith Lord remains silent for several more moments. The sound of his mechanical breathing only makes Leia more conscious of how much time is passing. But rather than allow his rage to pool, Leia says, "Please, Darth Vader, Padmé was at the wrong place at the wrong time. *Please* don't punish her for something she isn't responsible for." Pleading with an Imperial—that was new. But this is *Padmé* she is pleading for, not for her own life. She would never stoop that low for herself, but there is little she wouldn't do for her mother figure.

She expects him to retort with some inflammatory remark, but instead, he is rather short with her. "You have provided me with sufficient information. That will be all."

And with that, he just *leaves*. Leia sits alone in her cell, brows furrowed in confusion as she contemplates what exactly just happened.

chapter iii: the dark truth.

Padmé Amidala stares blankly at the ceiling of the room the Stormtroopers placed her in. Despite the fear and anxiety building within her, she lays almost peacefully on the gray bed in the room. She's been panicking so much for the past few hours that she just feels numb now, like all the feeling has just drained out of her.

She's already exhausted all of the possibilities why Vader sent her here, all of which end badly. There probably isn't much she can do the save Leia, either, not unless she can escape. But without outside help, escaping from a high-security Star Destroyer didn't seem very plausible. Padmé can't even get out of this *room*—she already tried—let alone an entire ship.

If she dies, perhaps she would see Anakin in the afterlife, if there is one awaiting her. Padmé smiles weakly to herself; it is a nice thought among many grim ones.

Padmé sits up on her bed when she hears the doors to the room slide open. Darth Vader is standing in the doorway and tentatively takes a few steps forward, almost as if he is nervous. She just peers at him, completely silent and still, waiting for him to speak rather than taking initiative herself. There's an anxious knot gathering in the back of her throat, she just wishes he would disappear. She wants this all to just disappear; she wishes to be back on Alderaan, watching the snow fall outside the window that looks into the courtyard.

Padmé doesn't want to talk to him at all, but she knows she doesn't have much of a choice. While she may not be in a cell, she is most certainly a prisoner.

"Are you afraid?" he asks her. Vader must sense her apprehension through the Force; Padmé remembers that Anakin and other Force users could usually interpret others' emotions just by being in their presence.

Yes, she answers in her head, but she would never admit that aloud. She won't give him the pleasure of knowing that she fears him.

Instead of answering, Padmé says nothing. She just looks into that empty stare of his and crosses her arms in defiance.

"You don't need to be," he continues once he realizes that he isn't going to get a vocal answer from her. She supposes that he doesn't really need one; she doesn't even understand why he asked her that question in the first place, when all he has to do is reach out through the Force to know.

This time, she says something in return. "And why is that?" she inquires, truly curious. His intentions are still a mystery to her, and it makes her beyond nervous not knowing what he wants.

Vader does not answer her question. Instead, he replies with a question of his own. "In the ship, you said you wouldn't tell me anything because you 'hate me.' Explain that to me; I have not seen you in nineteen years. What have I done to warrant your hatred?"

Nineteen years? Padmé ponders. Could Vader have been someone she knew? A former Jedi, perhaps?

“What do you mean, ‘nineteen years?’” she asks. “I’ve never seen you in person until today.”

“You have,” he replies. ‘You just don’t know it.’ Before Padmé can say anything, Vader continues. “I would like for you to answer my question. Why did you say that you hate me?”

He demands nothing of her, Padmé realizes. One would think that Vader would only give orders, give her commands. But he doesn’t—instead, he *requests* this information of her.

She gulps, but the nervous knot in her throat remains. Though she has heard his voice many times now, Padmé still hasn’t gotten used to the deep, mechanical voice that still sounds somewhat human. Nor has she gotten used to his respirator, which is unnervingly loud in the thickening silence.

Padmé stands so that she is more level with Vader, trying to muster her courage. Even when she is up on her feet, the shadowy figure of Darth Vader still looms ominously over her. She feels trapped, like a caged animal being prepared for slaughter, despite the fact that Vader has made no move to harm her. He hasn’t even *threatened* her.

But it is impossible for her to not be comfortable when she is standing in the same room as a Dark Lord of the Sith. Her room is a relatively standard size for a spacecraft, but still smaller than most bedrooms in a house or an apartment. Vader is standing on the other side of the room from her, but he not actually many feet away from her.

She looks at Vader, regards the man who murdered her husband with nothing but disdain. “I said that I hate you because I *do*,” she responds. “You *killed* my husband.”

“Did I, now?” he replies. If his voice wasn’t so flattened and distorted by his mask, Padmé may have thought that she had amused him. “And who told you that lie? Obi-Wan Kenobi?”

Padmé tenses up and furrows her brow in both confusion and frustration, easily betraying to Vader that he is correct. It was Obi-Wan who told her that Darth Vader was the man who took away her husband, but how could Vader simply assume that?

Darth Vader takes a step toward her, and Padmé nearly staggers back, but the edge of the bed stops her.

“*Padmé*,” he says, almost softly. Vader speaks her name with such familiarity that it unsettles and flusters her. “Obi-Wan lied to you.”

“*Don’t* say my name like that,” she snaps, glowering at him now. “Don’t say my name like you know me.”

“I know you better than you think,” Vader counters. “And unlike Obi-Wan, I’m not a liar. I didn’t kill your husband.”

Padmé’s heart flutters in her chest like a caged bird. She wants that to be true. She wants Anakin to be alive so badly, so desperately, and Vader must know this. He’s using Anakin against her, but for what, she doesn’t know. There is a part of her, a dark, despairing part of her, that wants to fall right into Vader’s lie. But she knows better than to trust a Sith; Padmé is no fool.

"It is true that Anakin Skywalker is gone, but he is not dead," continues Darth Vader. "In order for me to live, he had to cease to exist."

"What do you mean by that?" Padmé presses, crossing her arms. She doesn't believe one word that comes out of Vader's mouth, but she is curious to see how whatever twisted plan he's conjured up will unfold. Besides, she has a gut feeling that if she gives him most of the responses he wants, he would be less inclined to choke the life out of her or her daughter.

"I was Anakin Skywalker."

He may have pushed it too far with this one. Padmé hasn't said a single word in several seconds, but he can feel the turmoil in her Force signature and see the bewilderment on her face. She seems to have shut down; it's like she has caved in on herself. It's like she was glass and he shattered her with just those four words— "*I was Anakin Skywalker.*"

Darth Vader does not rush her. He is not a patient man, but he would wait for Padmé, especially in such a delicate situation.

Finally, Padmé opens her mouth to speak, and Vader is hanging on to every last word. "You're—" she starts, but then her voice breaks as her brown eyes become glossy with tears that threaten to brim over. Padmé draws in a deep breath, and Vader can feel her through the Force, struggling to push her maelstrom of emotions into a corner.

"You're lying—that's *not* true. That's *impossible!*" Her voice is slightly raised now, but it is not out of anger, but rather in tumult.

Her emotions are haywire. She's losing it on the inside, but Vader doesn't need the Force to tell him that.

"The only reason you are upset is because you *know* that it is possible." Darth Vader is slowly pushing her over the edge, but he figures that perhaps that is exactly what she needs to see the truth.

His gaze moves up and down Padmé until it finally settles on her necklace. He had noticed it before on the *Tantive IV*, and he knows exactly what it means. Padmé may say that she hates him, that she hates Darth Vader. But the japor snippet she wears tells another story: that after all these years, she still loves Anakin Skywalker.

She still loves Anakin Skywalker—in spite of her romance with the princess's father. Vader never saw Bail Organa as a threat in the days of the Old Republic, when he was still a Jedi hero. It makes his blood boil to think that all that time he was with Padmé, Bail may have had his eye on her. Of course, Bail would have been unaware of their relationship, but he was married to Breha at the time. There is the slightest possibility that Padmé and Bail may have been together while Padmé carried on with him, but Vader tries to put that thought to rest immediately. His anger has not completely blinded him right now, and he shouldn't scare Padmé with any assumptions.

"The japor snippet around your neck?" he says. "I gave that to you when I was nine. And you still wear it after all these years, despite your relationship with *Bail Organa*." And there it is—a little flame of his outrage at Padmé and Bail's relationship. Ever since the Princess of

Alderaan had spilled that to him, he hasn't been able to stop mulling over it in his mind. Padmé and Bail together is an utterly miserable thought; her lips against his, them spending the night together... His insides twist abhorrently.

Perhaps he should kill Bail in his spare time, he ponders. He would make him suffer, of course, perhaps cut off his limbs and stab holes into his body before he lets him die. But he would neat about it, ensure that it didn't look like Vader was responsible for his death. Padmé would never know.

His anger is kindling within him, but he is on his best behavior right now. For once, Vader is actually trying to mind himself. Padmé's presence is calming enough to prevent him from lashing out, luckily.

"Leave Bail out of this," Padmé tells him sternly. The fire in him grows as she defends her lover, and he vows silently to himself that there is nothing she can do to protect that rebel scum from his wrath. It would hurt Padmé if he killed Bail, and that fact alone makes him want to cut every piece of furniture into pieces with his lightsaber. The fact that she actually *cares* for him is what hurts him so deeply. He can feel it through the Force that Padmé does genuinely love Organa. She isn't just using him, stringing him along like a toy. But he *wishes* that she was. It wouldn't take away his inflamed jealousy, but it would soften the blow.

"You have no business in my love life." Padmé's features are no longer fearful. He can tell that she is trying to be more austere, to compose herself, but she cannot stop the moisture from gathering in her eyes. She can only fight them from falling.

Vader doesn't want to see her in pain like this, but he tries to reason that the pain is necessary for Padmé to accept the truth. And once she does, perhaps it won't hurt her anymore.

"I mourned you for years, Padmé," he tells her. "And I still did until today. But clearly, you didn't do the same." His voice is full of venom and he knows that what he said was cold, but he'll have to make her more vulnerable if he's going to make her believe him. Padmé has these walls up, and Vader must break them down.

"You don't get to tell me how I feel about my husband's death," Padmé retaliates. Along with the sadness in her features, there is anger, too. He can feel it rise within her, and though it is directed at him, he likes the way it looks on her. "You know *nothing*."

Inside of his mask, which Padmé cannot see, Vader is raising his brow. "Must I continue to prove that I am who I say I am?" he asks her. When she doesn't answer immediately, he continues. "We married on Naboo, by a lake. Our twenty-second anniversary passed just weeks ago."

He seems to have struck a nerve, because a single tear finally falls from Padmé's eye. She isn't glaring at him anymore, and the anger that once twisted her features has no relaxed and given way to her realization. The truth is starting to sink in—he can feel it.

But Vader doesn't stop there. "There was once a time when I gave you my lightsaber in your office on Coruscant. We were arguing about your duties as a senator getting in the way of our relationship," he says. Vader recalls the moment like it was yesterday. He was a young, naïve Jedi, and Padmé the responsible Senator of Naboo. He had suggested going on vacation for two weeks, but Padmé told him that presenting a bill to the Senate was more important.

Vader had given Padmé his lightsaber to prove how important their relationship was to him—after all, a Jedi’s lightsaber was his life, as his former master had once told him.

“And you thought I was making fun of you,” Vader finishes his little flashback. Though he doesn’t mention it to Padmé, he remembers pulling her close and kissing her in that office. He has not kissed his wife in nearly twenty years, not since that night on Coruscant after the attack on the Jedi Temple. And he realizes, with a sinking feeling in his chest, that he would probably never be able to again. Not only is Padmé against the Empire right now, but he is also confined to this suit, and his injuries... he would never allow Padmé to see him like that.

Padmé is shaking her head at him, and he decides to take a look into her mind. It isn’t difficult to intrude on her thoughts; her guard has fallen.

Anakin and I were completely alone in my office, she is thinking. He couldn’t know that, unless... unless...

Vader’s heart swells with hope that she’ll believe him, that he’s gotten through to her. As Padmé remains silent, deep in her thoughts, Vader decides to continue to peek into her mind. He has never read her thoughts before, and he has never been more intrigued by the workings of someone’s mind. Vader has interrogated countless rebels, flipped through their deepest thoughts and memories, but this is different. He isn’t forcing his way into Padmé’s thoughts, either. He is just barely grazing the surface, reading only what is going through her mind at this instant. Vader *could* delve deeper, but decides to allow Padmé her privacy.

His onslaught of nostalgia has sent her mind whirling. A moving image appears in Padmé’s head, one of that day in her office. He is quite pleased, but also somewhat haunted, by the exact moment Padmé has captured.

Padmé holds his lightsaber in her hand, looking up at him doubtfully. She is wearing one of her senatorial dresses, grand and beautiful and elegant.

“It’s yours,” Anakin tells her. Anakin, not Darth Vader. Anakin Skywalker, with his light brown hair, gentle sky-blue eyes, unmarred and handsome features. “Believe me now?”

Padmé’s eyes are copper in the sunlight that pours into her office. She scoffs and her gaze flickers down to the ground, but then returns to Anakin. “If all you want to do is make fun of me,” she sighs, “I think you should just go.”

She begins to walk away, but Anakin puts his hand on her shoulder, stopping her. “That’s not what I want,” he replies, caressing her cheek with his gloved hand. “Not at all.”

The disappointment on Padmé’s face falls and is replaced by warmth. She smiles up at her husband and leans into kiss him, and—

Padmé’s thoughts are suddenly cut off as she shuts herself down. Vader realizes that while he was listening in, he had been holding his breath, and the room had gone utterly quiet without the sound of his respirator.

Her incredulous stare bores into him, but the truth is setting in. The turmoil, the chaos within her begins to subside, leaving clarity in its wake. Padmé knows the truth and he can feel it, knows it just as well as she does.

Another tear falls down her cheek. He wishes she wouldn't cry like that, and if he didn't think she would recoil from him, he would have wiped it away with his hand.

"If you're Anakin," she says, her voice almost cracking as she speaks, "then show me. Remove your mask, and then I'll know the truth."

He can't—*he won't*. Despite having almost all of the power in the galaxy, Vader's appearance and injuries make him feel absolutely pathetic and weak. He can bend the Force with a simple raise of his hand, cut down armies with his lightsaber, but at the end of the day, Vader is forever crippled by what Obi-Wan did to him.

"No," he tells her. "You already know the truth." And he's right, he knows he is. Padmé knows that he is—*was* Anakin. Otherwise, she wouldn't be so upset. She wouldn't be crying.

"Why?" she asks. "Why do you wear it?"

He decides to enlighten her. Though it may be embarrassing for him, Padmé deserves the truth, and he is hoping that this new information will unveil the truth that Obi-Wan is not the man Padmé believes he is, that he is deplorable.

"Obi-Wan did this to me," Vader replies acerbically. "On Mustafar, we battled. To say the least, it did not end well for me. He severed the three of my remaining limbs, and I fell near a river of lava. The flames caught onto my clothes. Obi-Wan stood there, *watched* as I burned alive."

Padmé inhales sharply. Her brow furrows in disbelief, shock, and pity. "Obi-Wan wouldn't... he cared about you, he—"

"He is the reason I have been imprisoned in this suit for the past nineteen years," Vader snaps. His voice raises slightly for a moment as his anger flares up, but he tries to calm his tone. "Do not defend him, Padmé. He did everything in his power to drive us apart, to hurt me."

"Obi-Wan didn't drive us apart," Padmé argues, shaking her head. "I didn't leave you, Anakin." He wants to correct her and tell her that Anakin is no longer his name, but given her emotional state, he decides to let it be for now.

"*You left me* when you turned to the Dark Side," she continues. "I could never be a part of that. I always knew you had anger, but I never thought... I never thought it could be so strong to drive you to... to *this*."

Padmé no longer regards him as a stranger, but she still looks at the darkness within him and is utterly disappointed. And there's something else, now—*despair*. He feels her spirit slowly being crushed and knows, with a pang of guilt, that it is because of him.

"Anakin Skywalker was weak," Vader says, his hands clenched into fists. He's trying not to lose it, but the fire within him has blazed into an inferno now. This is all *Obi-Wan's* fault; he's poisoned Padmé's mind and she's still turned against him after all this time. "I *destroyed* him."

Two more tears dribble down Padmé's cheeks. "Don't talk like that," she says. "There *is* good in you. I know it, I—I know you."

But she is wrong. There is no conflict within Vader; he is fully realized as a Dark Lord of the Sith, and if not for his injuries, he would have risen far above his master by now.

"In time, you will realize that things are better this way," he tells her. His fists are still clenched at his side, but there is nothing to release his anger on right now. Vader had made the mistake of taking his rage out on Padmé, and he has regretted it for nearly two decades. He will not repeat that mistake.

"Anakin—"

"That is *not* my name," he cuts her off. His words have grown harsher, and Padmé seems to realize that, because she flinches when he snaps at her.

"I—" she begins, but then she stops. Padmé sits down on the bed looks down at the ground, refusing to look at him. "Just go, please."

She buries her face in her hands to shield her tears from Vader's eyes. "*Just leave,*" she tells him again. Her voice is firm despite the sobs that begin to rack her body.

Vader wants to apologize, but he decides to do as Padmé says. He turns and walks out the door, leaving Padmé alone in her room.

The moment he is gone from her presence, Vader is no longer able to contain himself. That calming aura of Padmé's has vanished, leaving him to succumb to the inferno of his own fury. Vader storms down the hallway and turns the corner to the passageway that leads to the main hall of this floor. As he emerges into the main corridor, several of his men glance at him in fear, but they quickly look away, knowing not to stare when Vader is in one of his moods.

Guilt, despair, shame—these grim emotions always have a way of manifesting themselves in the form of rage within Vader. And when an Imperial protocol droid passes by him and says, "Greetings, Lord Vader," he quite literally loses it.

Vader turns to the droid, absolutely seething, and grabs it by the neck. Several Imperials stop dead in the hallway, while others move along, minding their business, not wanting to be next. He smashes the droid against a wall again and again, until the light that illuminates its eyes flickers and dies and it is nothing more than a scrap of metal. It doesn't even *look* like it was once a droid.

He turns and looks at the railing at the end of the hall. Below him are several other floors, where Imperials march and meander about. Some of them are probably actually having a pleasant day, and he instantly hates them for it.

Vader takes banged up metal that was once a protocol droid and thrusts it over the railing. It falls down several floors, hitting a group of armored Stormtroopers. A few of them fall to the floor, while the others help them up.

"Ow!" one of them exclaims. "What was that?"

But by the time they look up, Vader is already gone, rushing down the main hall to the elevator.

chapter iv: the princess.

Darth Vader's head is still whirling from his confrontation with Padmé, and though he wants to take time to meditate on the Dark Side, he has important business to attend to. *The Devastator* docked in the Death Star hours ago, and Vader is to attend a meeting with other high-ranking officials in the Empire. Padmé has been moved by his personal guards to a new room by his quarters, and Leia Organa to the Detention Center.

He and Grand Moff Tarkin enter the conference room to discuss the situation with the Rebellion. If any of them step out of line, Vader already knows he won't be able to stop himself from snapping their neck. There is still an unstoppable, untamable rage blazing within him, kindled by the resurgence of hatred for Obi-Wan and the lies he filled Padmé's head with. Lies that she still believes, lies that the Rebel Alliance and Bail Organa have now enforced.

He glares at each and every one of the men sitting in the conference room; they better be on their best behavior, or they will surely face Vader's wrath.

"...will continue to gain support in the Imperial Senate as long as—" Commander Tagge respectfully stops speaking when he sees that Lord Vader and Tarkin are now present. His head, along with everyone else's, turns to the two high-ranking men.

"The Imperial Senate will no longer be of any concern to us, Tarkin says to Tagge, crossing the room to stand at his chair. Vader follows, but he keeps himself a few feet away from everyone else." I've just received word that the Emperor has dissolved the council permanently. The last remnants of the Old Republic have been swept away."

Padmé would hate the sound of that, but Vader relished it. The Old Republic was corrupt and inefficient—it deserved to burn. Someday, he would make Padmé see that.

Tarkin and Tagge begin to bicker over the bureaucracy and politics, which bores Vader so intensely that he tunes out. He has always hated politics, and politicians, for that matter—save for Padmé. But when Tagge mentions the Death Star plans, Vader's attention is focused back in on the conversation.

"If the Rebels have obtained a complete technical readout of this station, it is possible, however unlikely, that they might find a weakness and exploit it."

"The plans you refer to will soon be back in our hands," Darth Vader growls sternly. He crosses his arms, his gaze trained coldly on Tagge. He wants to *strangle* someone—and perhaps Tagge will be so unlucky if he keeps pushing it.

Admiral Motti, in his arrogance, begins to argue about how much more powerful the Death Star is than any weakness the Rebels may find in the plans. Vader turns his anger on the admiral rather than on Tagge; he uncrosses his arms and clenches his fists threateningly. But Admiral Motti seems to transfixed on what he is saying to notice.

"This battle station is now the ultimate power in the universe. I suggest we use it!" he says.

Vader cuts in, and though his voice is flattened by his mask, his tone is teeming with anger. “Don’t be too proud of this technological terror you’ve constructed,” he growls. “The ability to destroy a planet is *insignificant* next to the power of the Force.”

Despite Vader’s anger, he may not have been so strongly inclined to squeeze the life out of Admiral Motti if did not respond so arrogantly—but alas, Motti’s pride gets the better of him. “Don’t try to frighten us with your sorcerer’s ways, Lord Vader. Your sad devotion to that ancient religion has not helped you conjure up the stolen data tapes, or given you clairvoyance enough—”

And that’s enough for Vader—any grip he had on his temper is now lost, and Vader releases his rage full-blast on Admiral Motti. He raises his hand and reaches out with his senses and feelings to morph the Force around Motti’s throat. The man begins to gasp for air, frantically grabbing at the collar of his uniform, as if that would save him.

A sadistic grin unfurls across Vader’s face. “I find your lack of faith disturbing,” he says.

Tarkin opens his mouth to speak, probably to stop Vader, but the Sith Lord makes a single, swift motion with his hand and Motti’s head abruptly falls against his shoulder. *SNAP*—the sound of his spine breaking resonates throughout the conference room. Some of the other men flinch, and Tarkin turns to scowl at Vader.

“Vader, that was absolutely unnecessary,” Tarkin chides.

“Perhaps,” he admits. His anger begins to settle, satisfied with the destruction he has wrecked upon Motti’s neck. “But Motti’s death is not a significant loss to the Empire.”

“We will discuss this later, Lord Vader, but for now,” says Tarkin, “I need everyone to focus back on the topic of the rebel base.”

Vader narrows his eyes; it would be in Tarkin’s best interest to not talk down to him. In the past few weeks, Vader has killed quite a few Imperials that he deemed incompetent, and he can sense Tarkin’s frustration with him. Killing Motti in front of the Grand Moff may not have been very tactical, but in the long run, it would only be ridding the Empire of a useless servant.

“Guards,” Tarkin signals to two men dressed in all black that stand at the door. They march forward and carry Motti’s body away—probably to an incinerator, or to a garbage chute.

Slowly, the other men at the conference table stop looking at Motti’s dead body as it disappears down the hallway and turn their attention back to Tarkin.

“Now,” he says, “Lord Vader will provide us with the location of the Rebel fortress by the time this station is operational. We will then crush the Rebellion with one swift stroke.”

Vader wonders to himself what Padmé would think of that, but he comes up with the answer instantly. She would be disgusted and agonized by the destruction of everything she has believed in, of everything she has been fighting for. Vader does not truly believe that Padmé is not a rebel; the princess was surely lying to him to protect her, which only proves to Vader that the depths of their relationship are greater than he had previously thought. Besides, it makes perfect sense that Padmé would be a member of the Rebel Alliance; she has been a freedom fighter before, and he would be surprised if that had changed now.

And if he does what he is supposed to do and tortures the princess like any other prisoner, Padmé may never forgive him. He cannot release her, and he must interrogate her if he is to locate the rebel base. It leaves him at quite the impasse.

The moment Padmé hears the sliding doors to her room open, she knows that it is Anakin—or Vader, as he insists is his name now. She is standing by the shelf against the wall on the left side of the room, perusing the objects that it holds. A tablet, likely for reading, a few trinkets, and a gray cube that seems to resemble a holocron. For hours now, she has been exploring her new room on the Death Star, which is much larger than the quarters she was in on *The Devastator*.

Padmé was given her suitcase from the *Tantive IV*, which now sits by the closet. She hasn't touched it, hasn't unpacked at all. She still wears her white bodysuit and boots, with her hair tied back into a braid. It's been a day or so, she believes, but time is difficult to pinpoint in space and there are no clocks in her room.

Despite Vader's presence, she does not turn to him when he enters the room. Rather, she fixes her gaze on the light gray wall in front of her.

"Padmé," he says. The usage of her name is a request for her attention and she knows it. But she decides not to comply immediately; instead, she looks down at the tablet sitting on the shelf and pretends that Vader never spoke.

"If you want me to leave, all you have to do is say the word," Vader continues. He makes no move to come closer to her and stands glued to his place in front of the door.

"I didn't say that I want you to leave," Padmé blurts. She hadn't been thinking before she spoke, but deep down she knows that it's true: she wants him to stay. Maybe it's her curiosity to find out more about who Vader is, and what he intends to do, or maybe it's her old feelings for Anakin.

Old or not, she has not tried to bury how she felt about Anakin. Despite her relationship with Bail Organa, the love she felt—and still feels—for her not-so-late husband was never dormant, was never sleeping within the depths of her heart.

"It seems that I upset you last time I visited," says Darth Vader. She still has not gotten used to the idea that he is Anakin Skywalker, her husband; that cold, unforgivingly harsh mechanical voice is impossible to associate with Anakin, and so are all of the awful things she knows he has done.

Padmé turns to him now. When her eyes settle upon his dark form, her heartbeat accelerates so quickly that she can hear the blood roar in her ears. He is a towering man, and though she knows he is Anakin, he has this foreboding aura about him; when he steps into a room, it fills with a thick, suffocating darkness.

"Yes, well," she replies, "it's a bit difficult to accept that you... that Anakin..."

When Padmé trails off, Vader responds, "I can understand." He seems to not know what to say, because he just stands there, wordless, the only sound coming from his respirator in the otherwise silent room. After a long pause, he goes on, "I... *want* to understand, Padmé."

“You really are Anakin,” she says, shaking her head. She still can’t believe it, but Padmé cannot ignore something that is clear as day. It makes perfect sense that Vader is Anakin, that Anakin is Vader, no matter how much she wants to deny it. Anakin had turned to the Dark Side at the exact time Darth Vader arose as a Sith Lord, not to mention that Vader knew things about Padmé’s past that only Anakin could know.

“Why do you still wear that?” Vader inquires, pointing at the japor snippet around Padmé’s neck. He almost moves forward, but then remains in place, as if he thinks better of it. He had mentioned the necklace before in their previous confrontation, Padmé recalls bitterly.

“The japor snippet around your neck? I gave that to you when I was nine. And you still wear it after all these years, despite your relationship with Bail Organa.”

He wants a confirmation, she realizes. Vader is still testing the waters, experimenting with her emotions—that should infuriate her, but it doesn’t. She understands his reasons; after nineteen years, he does not know how much she has changed, or how little. Vader wants her to confirm that she still cares for him, but she isn’t sure if she can do that. She isn’t sure if she can stomach it, or if she can even admit that aloud.

Is it true? she wonders for a moment. But she knows the answer immediately.

Vader is a monster; one could see that just by looking at him. But if he does still love her, then doesn’t that mean that Anakin is still in there? Or maybe Vader doesn’t love her at all—it’s a thought that makes her heart twist, makes something inside her tremble. It is quite possible, Padmé considers, that Vader wants to possess her, solely out of his former attachment to her. But she would hate that. She *wants* him to love her; for her own sake and for his.

“I didn’t leave Anakin—I didn’t leave you behind,” Padmé replies after a brief moment of silence. She tries to inspire the good part of him that she wants to believe still lingers. If it no longer exists, she doesn’t know what she will do.

“Why?” he presses.

“You know why,” she tells him. “But you want me to say it, don’t you?”

“I asked nothing of you,” Vader responds, seemingly incredulous to what Padmé means. She doesn’t buy it.

“I still love Anakin,” Padmé says. And it’s true; she does. But she is unsure of how to separate Anakin from Darth Vader. She loves Anakin Skywalker, not this dark part of him. She does not love the destruction he has caused, the lives he has stolen in the name of the Empire. But she still carries a torch for the man who fought to save the galaxy, for the man who was known as a galactic hero. The galaxy has forgotten about him now, but Padmé still remembers.

“Then why didn’t you come with me?” he asks her. “On Mustafar, I offered you everything and you turned it down.”

His question strikes a nerve and it leaves Padmé reeling. She is shocked that he would ask her such a thing, that he would doubt her feelings for him. But she shouldn’t be, considering how jealous he had been over Bail and how power-hungry he is now. She wonders how long he has been replaying that scene in his mind, twisting it to fit his own dark truth.

“Because I don’t want the Empire,” Padmé replies, crossing her arms in defiance. Her voice remains unwavering and completely calm. She wants to speak her opinion, but she does not want to send Vader into a boiling rage. “I don’t condone the things you’ve done. I don’t love the darkness you’ve succumbed to. What I love is the man I married, the man I spent years wanting to bring back to life.”

Vader says nothing in response. He must be processing everything she is saying, and so Padmé takes a chance. Now it is her turn to test him.

She moves forward, stepping towards him. He does not recoil from her, but he does not return the gesture, either.

“And I think,” she says, “that the good parts of you that I fell in love with still exist.” Padmé is standing only inches away now, and she peers into the eyes of Vader’s mask. Her own reflection looks back at her rather than the blue eyes that she yearns to see.

“Because if they didn’t,” Padmé continues, “I don’t believe that you would be here right now. You would have let me rot in a cell.”

“It is the *Jedi* who are not meant to know love,” Vader counters. The hope in Padmé’s face falls; she hasn’t given up on him, but his response is discouraging. They were doomed to a life of secrecy if he had remained a Jedi, but she would have preferred that over their situation now.

“Someday, I’ll convince you to see that I’m right,” says Padmé. Her words are certain, but she isn’t. She doesn’t know if she still has that much influence over him, or if he even truly loves her, for that matter.

“No,” he tells her, shaking his head. “It is *you* who will see reason.”

“Ani—”

“*Padmé*,” Vader interjects. “If you could only see things from my point of view, you would understand. You’re looking through the lens of a rebel, but I can make you understand Imperial justice and order the way that I do. The Republic was inefficient and weak—how could the Emperor take power so easily if it was not?”

“You’ve always been stubborn,” Padmé sighs in dejection.

“So have you,” he replies.

She would have smiled if the tension in the room wasn’t so thick. If they were bickering when she was still a senator and he was still a Jedi, they would have quickly fallen out of the argument. But that was nineteen years ago and the era of the Old Republic has ended.

“But as I recall, it was one of the things you liked about me,” Padmé muses in an attempt to appeal to his better side—to the pieces of Anakin that might still exist within him.

“That is not the point of this conversation,” Padmé frowns; that was not the response she wanted. She is astounded by just how little she knows him now—he is all but a stranger to her in some ways.

“I can forgive your betrayals if you agree to join me,” Vader tells her. “Mustafar, Bail Organa, your allegiance to the Rebel Alliance. We could put it all behind us and start again.”

There is a spark of hope in his voice, like he has deluded himself into believing that Padmé could ever follow him down the dark path he has chosen.

Betrays, she repeats in her head. She dwells on that word, and it ignites an inferno of frustration—border lining on fury—within her.

“I never—” her voice wavers as her bottom lip begins to tremble. “No. I *never* betrayed you. I didn’t even know you were alive until you told me who you are. Even now, I’m not—I’m not turning my back on you, Anakin.” She uses his former name in a desperate attempt to reach out to him, to chip away at the concrete walls he has blockaded himself around.

“Oh?” he nearly snarls. “You never betrayed me? You brought Obi-Wan to Mustafar, and then you joined the Rebel Alliance, an organization dedicated to bringing me and the Empire down.”

“Stop,” she tells him. “Obi-Wan stowed away on my ship, I had no idea he was there. And I’m against the Empire, Anakin, not *you*.”

“I *am* the Empire,” he snaps. Padmé does not have the same connection to the Force as Vader does, but she doesn’t need it to see that he is losing his temper. But she can’t back down; if she does, she’s giving in, and he will see it as a victory. She must make it clear that he will *never* turn her to the Empire’s side.

“Please, Anakin...” she trails off, but then finds her voice again. It returns much stronger and more certain this time. “You don’t have to be this way.”

But he does not stop. She’s set him off and it’s likely that this argument won’t end until he gets frustrated and storms out.

“And the worst betrayal of all,” Vader snarls. “Is that you started a romantic relationship with Bail Organa. He is the reason you and the princess are so adamant about protecting each other.”

Padmé lets go of any ill feelings and anger she was holding onto and building up. They all release at once the moment Vader mentions Leia, and she quickly spirals into a panic. *Did he speak to Leia? Does that mean... no, he couldn’t, not his own daughter...*

And yet he could. Even if he knew, Padmé isn’t sure that he wouldn’t harm her.

Her eyes widen and she staggers back. For a moment, she just stands there as all the color drains from her face, turning her white as a ghost. Padmé shakes her head and stares at him with anguish and disbelief in her eyes.

“Please tell me you didn’t hurt her,” she says. “She hasn’t done anything wrong; she’s just a child, Anakin.”

“She is a leader of the *Rebel Alliance*,” Vader counters. “She is more than just a child now.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Padmé pries, her voice becoming more and more frantic with every word she speaks.

“I did not harm the princess,” he replies, the irritation clear in his voice. She knows that he must have wanted to—but if he restrained himself, that is just proof to Padmé that he can be

saved, that he still has redeeming qualities. “I simply spoke to her, and she was... somewhat compliant.”

“What do you mean?” Padmé’s entirely body is nearly trembling, the panic still sinking in, threatening to consume her.

“I only asked her questions about you,” Vader admits. “I spoke to her before I came here for the first time.”

“But do you intend to harm her?” demands Padmé.

“I must extract information from her,” he replies, not giving her a straight answer. Padmé narrows her eyes, knowing what that must mean. “I would prefer not to subject you to such things, but the princess is... a volatile member of the Alliance. She must be dealt with.” Her heart fills with dread the more Vader speaks—*dealt with*, he says. Padmé almost scoffs in disgust.

“No!” Padmé snaps. Despite the tears that have welled up in her eyes, her voice is stern. “Anakin, *please*, spare her.”

“Why?” he growls. “Because her death would hurt Bail Organa?”

“Because it would hurt *me*,” she fires back. Padmé grows tired of him turning the conversation around back to Bail; she cannot see his face, but his jealousy burns through any composure he had that she knows almost exactly how he feels. Although Vader is clearly angry, she believes she may be able to break through to him, to appeal not to Vader, but to Anakin Skywalker.

“Please,” Padmé begs. A single tear dribbles down her face, and she silently hopes that it will make Vader feel guilty. Not because she wants him to hurt, but because if he feels guilty for hurting her, then her husband is truly still in there. ‘I love her; she’s like— “Padmé pauses for a moment, not sure if she should finish that sentence.” She’s like a daughter to me,’ she finishes. “Isn’t there anything I could do to save her?”

“Can you provide me with the location of the rebel base? Can you return the Death Star plans to me?” he asks, crossing his arms. She doesn’t believe it’s a serious question; he must already be aware that Padmé cannot give him those things.

“I don’t know where it is,” she lies. But Vader must know that she isn’t telling the truth, no matter how well she tries to hide it. “And I don’t know what happened to the Death Star plans.” Pretending to know nothing is and feigning innocence is her best bet, she decides. Vader may believe her eventually if she keeps the act up.

But then a new idea comes to mind. There is only one other thing that she can use to bargain for her daughter’s life—*herself*. She can’t believe she’s considering it, but there is nothing Padmé wouldn’t do to keep Leia alive.

“I can’t give you the location of the base or the plans, but,” Padmé says, “you said that you wanted me to join you. If you keep Leia alive, and if you don’t harm her, I will relinquish my allegiance to the Rebel Alliance and pledge it to the Empire instead. I’ll come with you willingly.”

The sound of his respirator is deafening. Neither of them speak for several moments; Vader must be considering her offer, weighing his options.

Finally, he says, "I'm an ambitious man, Padmé. I want a little more than that."

"What more could you possibly want?" she asks, almost in disbelief. But she should have seen this coming, with how power hungry he is.

"I want you to send a recording to the Rebel Alliance," Vader tells her, "of you swearing your allegiance to the Empire. And I want you to tell Bail Organa that you never loved him."

Padmé recoils from him, scowling. She loves her husband, but right now, she looks at him and just sees a monster again, just as she viewed him before he told her that he and Anakin are the same. "That's incredibly cruel, Anakin," she remarks.

She never could have loved Bail the way she has loved Anakin, but to say something like that to him—it would be heinous.

"Very," he agrees with a nonchalant nod. "And I'll add one more demand to that list: you will stop referring to me as Anakin, but as Vader instead—my *true* name."

"Will you set Leia free?" Padmé inquires, rather than outright agreeing to his new demand.

"That is asking too much," Vader replies. "I cannot allow a leader of the Rebel Alliance to roam free. I will let her live, and I will allow you to see her."

She feels like her heart has been wrenched out of her chest. For him to ask such awful things of her, to hurt Bail like that, and to forever burn the bridges between her and her rebel friends—it was just so *cold*. But that's exactly what Vader is. She is not convinced that her husband is gone, but Vader certainly makes it believable that the good in him is lost forever.

"Why do I have to hurt Bail like that?" Padmé tries to protest. "How does that solve anything for you?"

"I could always just kill him," Vader muses. "I would like to, but breaking his heart will suffice."

Padmé says nothing. She just stares at him with watery eyes and a furrowed brow.

"Do you agree to my terms?" he prompts her.

"I—" she wants to shake her head no and tell him that she will never join him, that she will never do the things he asks of her. But she knows what the consequences of those actions would be. And Leia means more to Padmé than herself, Bail, and her friendship with the rebels combined.

"Yes," she says reluctantly. "I agree."

Padmé will never truly be loyal to the Empire, but if she has to act like she is to save her daughter, she will do it. She just wishes that she didn't have to fulfill Vader's other terms, but she supposes that he could do worse. The knowledge that she will break Bail's heart will likely appease him enough not to kill him, and heartbreak is better than death. Bail could get over her. He could move on and be happy with time.

“Good,” Vader says in response. He turns to the door, but before he leaves, he turns his head back to Padmé. “And since you’ve decided to cooperate, I would like it if you would allow me to show you around the ship—since you will spend a considerable amount of time here.”

She doesn’t look at him, but she replies, “Okay.”

And then he is gone, leaving Padmé to cross the room and bury her face in one of the pillows on her bed.

Darth Vader is still feeling elated by the time he is marching down the hallway in the Detention Center to the princess’s cell. His anger for Padmé’s lack of cooperation quickly fizzled out when she promised herself to the Empire, and to him. Today is quite the victory for him, and it may even get better if he is successful with the princess. A mind probe floats behind him, and his usual interrogation team follows him as well. He won’t be needing them, but he didn’t want to say that in front of Tarkin, who was present when they were dispatched. Vader will be expected to harm the princess, and if he doesn’t, Tarkin may question him, which is something he doesn’t need. Nothing must seem out of place; he must be cautious.

Vader intends to hold up his end of the bargain. He will not harm the princess—physically. It is a good thing that Darth Vader is an experienced interrogator; he has more tricks up his sleeve than violence. Of course, he was going to make the princess bleed until she broke, but then Padmé’s offer came along. He couldn’t have refused; it was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Psychological and emotional torture would have to suffice. He’s been considering exactly how he’ll do it—he has all but decided that he will begin the interrogation by making the princess hallucinate that everyone she loves is dying. If he can make her believe that her family and friends are dying because of her, perhaps she will break. Vader isn’t sure what he will do if Leia resists his interrogations, but he will deal with that if the time comes.

When he reaches the princess’s cell, he presses a button on by the frame of the door. The entrance slides open, revealing the princess, still dressed in white with her hair in two buns on the sides of her hair. Panic flashes in her eyes, but it is gone as soon as it comes. She steels herself and looks directly at Vader.

“And now, Your Highness, we will discuss the location of your hidden rebel base,” Vader tells her. The mind probe drifts into the center of the cell, and the princess’s brow furrows as she realizes what it is, and what Vader intends to do with it.

He turns to his men. “I would like a private interrogation,” he instructs them. “Wait in the entry room of the Detention Center.”

Neither the interrogation team or the princess questions him. The men simply leave, and Leia shifts uncomfortably as the doors close behind them.

Vader can sense the fear coming off of her in waves, and he finds it immensely satisfying to know that the Princess of Alderaan, known for her boldness and bravery, is afraid of him. Being alone in a cell with a Sith Lord must be the last place she wants to be, but there is no escape for Leia Organa, and there never will be, if Vader has anything to do with it.

chapter v: alderaan's fate.

During their interrogation session, Vader ripped apart Leia's mind—or tried to. He's been brooding ever since he visited the princess in her cell; *nothing* was achieved by torturing her. But he does not think it's because he did not physically harm her—physical pain is meaningless compared to the psychological torture he inflicts on his prisoners. Princess Leia is the single most resistant person he has ever encountered. It was frustratingly difficult to morph her senses and thoughts the way he wanted, and she displayed a dangerously strong opposition to the mind probe. Not only could she resist advanced technology, but also his Force powers.

If they were in another time period, he is sure Leia would have been scouted out by the Jedi Order.

He was unsuccessful in extracting the location of the rebel base from her, as it was kept locked away in a deep part of her mind that she would not allow him to access. Every time he tried, it was like pounding on a steel door with a bare fist. But he did learn quite a bit about the princess.

Her mother, Breha Organa, was killed by Imperials. She had been holding onto memories of her mother to comfort herself during the interrogation, and Vader was able to look into the surface of her mind. So he took that information and Leia's warm, loving memories of her mother and turned them into a nightmare.

Using the mind probe and his Force influence, he made Leia hallucinate several different scenarios of Breha Organa dying. Over and over again, the princess watched her mother be killed by Imperial assassins. Sometimes Vader had them stab her to death, shoot her, burn her alive, suffocate her, drown her, decapitate her. It was heinously violent, vicious, but Vader relished every moment of it. He couldn't hurt the princess, but he was still giving her everything she deserved for defying the Empire.

It does unsettle him more than he would like to admit that part of him feels ashamed of himself. After he walked away from Leia's cell, he imagined Padmé's face in his mind, shaking her head and frowning at him in disgust. She hates and fears the darkness in him, and he knows it.

Padmé was another thought that Vader was able to see in the princess's mind. As he forced her to hallucinate that she was drowning, the princess focused on her happy memories with Padmé. He dwelled on them for several moments, just as she did. And unlike Breha, he did not turn the memories against the princess; it would be more of a punishment to him than to Leia if he created images of horrible things happening to Padmé.

He saw her holding hands with Padmé when she was a child as they walked down a beautifully decorated hallway, likely in the Alderaan Royal Palace. He saw Padmé braiding Leia's hair in a pair of braids in a pink bedroom, one made for a little girl. They both seemed to be filled with joy when they were around each other, always smiling and making gestures of affection.

It was painful to watch—it reminded Vader of the child he had always thought he had lost. (Vader has not yet confronted Padmé about the possibility of their child being alive, but it was a conversation for a different day.) He tried to push that thought away, but it nagged at him, and he wondered to himself for a moment whether their child would have been a boy or a girl. It had also occurred to him that perhaps to Padmé, the princess is a replacement for the child she lost, and that is why she was so desperate to save her. Even if their child still lived, Vader doubts that Padmé would have had contact with them; they would have been separated. She had been living with the princess and Bail for so long, and he saw nothing in Leia's mind that suggested another child lived with them.

Padmé was the strongest tether Leia had to her sanity while Vader relentlessly tortured her. She was the only thing that kept the panic from setting in too deep. He allowed her that one solace, but only because it was his wife.

When the princess was hallucinating that she was submerged in an ocean, the sensations and images had become so strong that she actually began to suffocate. Her body did not believe she was dying, but her mind did. He stood there and watched, arms crossed, as Leia fell to her knees, gasping desperately for air and cough up water that did not exist. There was no physical pain involved, but Vader figures that the memory will follow the princess into her nightmares.

Though it may be satisfying for him to have caused the princess pain, he is certain that Tarkin will not be pleased with the results of the interrogation. But he also assumes that his disappointment will be directed at the princess, and not at him.

Vader walks into the control room, where he was informed Tarkin is, overseeing the maintenance of the Death Star's superlaser. The moment he approaches, Tarkin turns to him.

"How did it go with the princess?" he inquires.

Vader shakes his head. "No progress was made," he reports.

"What do you mean?" Tarkin questions, cocking an eyebrow.

"Her resistance to the mind probe is considerable," explains Vader. "It will be some time before we can extract any information from her." Slowly, if the interrogations continued, he would be able to break her down. No one, not even the emboldened Princess Leia, can hold out for that long.

"And what of the other prisoner? Amidala?" asks Tarkin. "I was informed that she isn't in a cell. You owe me an explanation." His voice is not stern, simply curious. Vader doubts Tarkin cares much for Padmé's condition. However, he must be aware of who she is; after all, Tarkin would remember Senator Padmé Amidala from the days of the Old Republic.

"She is someone from my past," Vader tells him. "I've been collecting information from her, but it seems she has been mostly kept in the dark about the Rebellion."

"She is old friend from your life before the Empire?"

Vader nods. It wasn't a complete lie.

"How do you know she is telling the truth?" Tarkin inquires further. "She is a former senator, and one who strongly supported democracy and freedom, after all."

"I've looked into her mind," Vader replies. A lie, but he is willing to keep things from Tarkin to ensure Padmé's safety. If he believes that she is irrelevant to the rebel's plans, she would be left alone. "And she trusts me."

"I see," is all Tarkin says. He isn't interested in Vader's personal life; he only cares for Imperial business when it comes to Vader. He's glad, because he doesn't want to elaborate on the situation with Padmé.

An imperial officer interjects before either Vader or Tarkin can say anything more.

"The final check-out is complete," he informs Tarkin. "All systems are operational. What course shall we set?"

He must mean the Death Star's superlasers, Vader thinks. Tarkin's eyes suddenly light up with a new idea, and he turns to Vader.

"Perhaps she would respond to an alternate form of persuasion," Tarkin suggests.

"What do you mean?" asks Vader.

"I think it's time we demonstrate the full power of this station," he says. Vader does not need a further explanation; he sees now exactly what Tarkin's intent is. The Grand Moff turns to the soldier, and says, "Set your course for Princess Leia's home planet of Alderaan."

"With pleasure," replies the officer. He walks away from Tarkin and Vader, leaving them alone.

Padmé will not be pleased with the destruction of Alderaan. Throughout the history of the galaxy, planets have been destroyed, but never by an actual battle station. Entire races and cultures have been wiped out by war, planets have burned and lost all ability to harbor life forms. But Alderaan's destruction would leave a major mark on galactic history, and would serve to demonstrate the true power of the Empire. Padmé will be furious when she finds out, but Vader will make no move to stop Tarkin from destroying the planet.

He almost smiles to himself when he realizes that Alderaan's destruction will mean Bail Organa's death. He supposes Padmé won't have to send that holo recording, then, but he doesn't mind. Vader could have settled for breaking Bail's heart, but death is a suitable punishment.

If he could, he would hide Alderaan's destruction from Padmé, but if she is to stay with him, there is no doubt she will eventually know. Alderaan was never part of their agreement; he is not breaking their deal by preventing the destruction of the planet. The only thing that truly matters is keeping the princess alive, for Padmé would never forgive him if he let her die. They made a deal, after all.

"Tarkin," Vader captures his attention. "You intend for the princess to be executed after she gives us the information we need, yes?"

Tarkin nods but narrows his eyes. "Of course. Why?"

"I would like to keep her alive," Vader tells him. "I believe that she can be broken, and she still knows a great deal about the Rebellion."

“If all goes well, we will crush the Rebel Alliance very soon,” says Tarkin. “We won’t need her for long.”

“But for now,” Vader insists. “I believe she could be useful.”

Tarkin seems skeptical, but then he shrugs, either because he doesn’t want to argue with Vader, or because the timing of the princess’s death does not deeply concern him. “Alright,” is all he says. Tarkin is most likely focused on the demonstration of the Death Star’s power, but Vader knows he’ll have to argue with him if he is to keep Leia alive. He has not figured out the excuse he’ll use yet, but he will have to think of one soon, for Padmé’s sake.

She wears one of her old senatorial dresses. It was a much brighter era the last time she wore this gown; she’s kept it all these years, but never touched it. The gown is a deep oceanic color, with delicate floral designs all across the front. She wears a dark navy overcoat that is floor-length like her dress and makes it appear fuller at the skirt than it actually is. Padmé’s hair is simple and flows in chestnut waves down her back. To make up for the simplicity of her hair style, however, she wears a pair of gold earrings and a matching headband. (And, of course, the japor snippet hangs around her neck.)

Padmé is glad she did not wear clothes of a lighter color, because she would have stood out far more than she already does. Vader walks beside her down the walkway of the bridge of the Death Star, where great windows reveal the endless black space, freckled with millions of silver points of light. Ever since she left her room, she has felt suffocated by the number of gazes on her. It feels like she is under a microscope, being scrutinized for her every move, something she was once used to as a Senator of the Republic.

Vader seems calm, of course, but then again, he doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve like he used to. She misses that about him, especially now, because while Padmé could always read Anakin, Vader is a complete mystery to her. Because his face is concealed, the only sense of emotion she can get from him is through his words, which are distorted by his mask. She misses his soft voice and his kind blue eyes; everything about Darth Vader is alien to her. She can see that he was—is Anakin, and yet somehow, he still feels like a stranger.

He’s been corrupted and molded into Palpatine’s monster for nineteen years; she should not expect anything less.

Sometimes Padmé is able to catch whispers of what Vader’s men are saying when she listens closely. It is only bits and pieces, as they are very careful.

“I heard she was captured with the princess...”

“Just don’t question Lord Vader about it...”

“Yeah, he might give you a death sentence for it, you know how—”

“Stars, she’s... but what is she doing with...”

His men are terrified of him, but that much she already knew. But still, it’s appalling to actually see the way they look at him, like he’s a bomb about to detonate at any given moment. Despite their curiosity, none of them dare approach Vader and ask questions.

The Death Star appears to be moving, to be going somewhere. There are planets in the distance that are slowly growing larger with each passing moment. She just hopes the Empire is not starting an invasion on some innocent planet, or worse yet, attacking the rebel base. Surely, they could not know that it is located on Yavin 4. Leia would never tell them anything, and they have no other rebels that would know in custody, she doesn't think.

"Where is the Death Star—where are we going?" Padmé asks Vader.

He is silent for a moment, staring out at space before he finally answers. "Nowhere important," he replies.

Padmé narrows her eyes; he must not want to tell her, which confirms her initial suspicions. But she decides not to bring it up, as it would only cause conflict.

One of the Death Star's admirals approaches Vader, but the man is careful not to look at Padmé for too long. He glances at her, but his eyes do not linger. "My lord," he says. The man gulps nervously, and Padmé prays that Vader won't choke the life out of him.

"Yes?" Vader replies, turning to the admiral.

"Grand Moff Tarkin requests that you—"

Vader shakes his head. "No, not now," he tells the admiral. "I already know what Tarkin wants. Tell him I will be there when we reach our destination."

Padmé simply listens in. By Vader's sharp tone and the admiral's confusion, she knows that her husband is keeping something from her. It would be pointless to ask, however. She would have to find out his secrets on her own.

"Oh, I see," says the admiral. "I will inform him of that, my lord." He bows his head respectfully and quickly marches away.

As soon as the admiral leaves, Vader turns to her. "Would you like to go somewhere more private?" he asks. "You seem very stiff."

"I—it's just that, there's so many people around, and I don't know this place," Padmé explains.

"Not to mention that they are staring," he says quite bluntly. She can't tell if his tone sounds irritated or if it's just always that flat.

"Yes, that too," agrees Padmé.

Vader simply nods. She wishes that he was more expressive, but he only seems to clearly show one emotion: anger. She longs to see Anakin's face, his kind blue eyes, soft, comforting smile. But she knows that it must be gone, burned away by the fires of Mustafar. She cannot imagine what he looks like now, and he clearly doesn't want her to know.

Together, Vader and Padmé leave the bridge of the Death Star. As she walks away, she can feel the stares of Imperials burning into her back. The same feeling follows her until she and Vader reach a long, empty walkway that looks out into space.

"I wanted to ask you something," Vader tells her as they walk. Their pace slows, and Padmé turns to look at the empty eyes of his mask. Her gaze is inquisitive and curious, but

she isn't sure that Vader even sees it. He doesn't look at her, but instead keeps his head straight and staring forward.

"What happened to you after Mustafar?" he asks Padmé.

She had not been expecting that question. Taken aback, Padmé looks to the floor, thinking on how she will answer that. She's almost certain that this conversation will lead up to a secret she holds very dear to her heart, a secret that she intends to keep locked away from Vader for as long as possible.

"I... I was dying," she explains. "Obi-Wan took me to a hospital on Polis Massa. In order to save me, I was placed in carbonite. It's different from what they use to freeze prisoners—a sort of medical carbonite, I suppose. I don't know the science behind it, but over twelve years, I was gradually healed and in total hibernation. It was only seven years ago that I was awakened."

"Carbonite," Vader repeats. He ponders for a moment, and then continues, "Did it... have any side effects?"

Padmé wonders if this is his way of asking her if she is alright. Vader is still very guarded around her, she has observed, and it may be some time before she breaks through his icy composure.

"Yes," she replies. "Because I was in hibernation, I didn't age for twelve years. Physically and mentally, I'm only thirty-four. I should be forty-six."

He is looking at her now, and he pauses, as if he wants to say something but then stops himself. Instead, Vader comments, "You lost a great deal of time."

"I still forget that it's been nineteen years," Padmé admits.

Vader stops in his tracks and turns to peer out at space. Padmé mirrors his actions and joins him by his side, watching as the Death Star grows closer to the planets in the distance. There are only two that she can see now, but she thinks she recognizes them both. Kuat must be the green planet, and Alderaan the blue and white. They must be in the Core Worlds... but for what reason?

"I thought you were dead," says Vader. 'For all nineteen of those years.' If she isn't mistaken, he sounds lamentable. "It is still strange for me to see you here, alive."

"My survival was covered up well," Padmé tells him. "A fake funeral with a fake body was arranged in Theed. It was broadcast across the galaxy and recorded into galactic archives. It was ensured that my death became a simple fact." It doesn't hurt now to admit this—after all, Vader already knows the truth that Padmé is alive and well.

"I know." There is unmistakable solemnness in his voice, and Padmé, despite all of the awful things he has done, feels pity for him. He truly did believe that she was dead for nearly two decades. She experienced the same pain for seven years, but seven years feels like nothing compared to nineteen. Anakin's suffering was far deeper, and far darker than hers.

"The Emperor told me that I killed you in my anger," Vader reveals. "As soon as I recovered from Mustafar, I asked if where you were, and if you were alright. He said that it was *my fault* you died."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes. It isn't her fault that Palpatine lied to him. It isn't her fault that he suffered for so long. But she apologizes anyway, because for a fleeting moment, Padmé doesn't see Vader standing before her, but Anakin.

"I should not have harmed you," says Vader. "On Mustafar. What I did, I... I want you to know that I have regretted it for the past nineteen years. I lost control of my anger."

She thinks back to that moment, how enraged her husband was as he raised his hand. Padmé remembers feeling an invisible force close around her neck, pressing down on her airway until she lost consciousness. And though she did not know it at the time, it was the first time she truly saw *Vader*, and not Anakin. He had Anakin's blue eyes, yes, his handsome face and his light curls, but it was Vader. The burning rage was unmistakably his.

"I forgave you for that a long time ago," she tells him gently. After all, she had believed that he had died. She wasn't going to hold a grudge against a dead man. "You thought I had tried to have you killed."

It is still an absurd idea to Padmé that Anakin would ever think she would try to kill him by bringing Obi-Wan with her. But he clearly did not see it that way; he had grown paranoid.

"That does not excuse it," Vader counters. He seems truly remorseful for Mustafar, an emotion Padmé never thought she would see on the Dark Lord of the Sith. It disappoints her that he can't feel this way for anything else he has done, but at least this does prove to her that her husband still cares for her, that she isn't just a possession to him. She had feared that Anakin was truly gone and that only Vader remained, a vicious shell of what her husband once was. But he isn't—he's right here and she can see him peeking out beneath Vader's harsh exterior.

There is silence for a while, and the two of them just stare out at space for a while. Padmé doesn't know what to say, doesn't want to scare away that glimmer of Anakin that keeps shining in Vader's darkness. But then she hears Vader's mechanical voice again.

"There is something else," he says, shifting the subject. "If you survived... did our child also live?"

He sounds so *hopeful*, and it breaks Padmé's heart knowing that she must lie to him. There is too much of the Dark Side in him; she cannot trust that he wouldn't try to turn her children over to the Emperor as he had done to himself.

Padmé shakes her head and tries to look grim. "He was a stillborn," she lies.

"*He?*" Vader asks. "We had a son?"

"Yes," she replies solemnly. Rather than her son's death, Padmé focuses on the fact that she may never see Luke, that they may never be reunited. It inspires enough sadness within her to keep up her act and fake her grief for their son's apparent death to Vader.

"What was his name?"

"Luke," Padmé tells him. Her son is on Tatooine and they are in the Core Worlds; it couldn't hurt for Vader to know. There are likely about a million Lukes in the entire galaxy. And perhaps he deserves to know at least that much, just the name of their son.

"*Luke*," he repeats. He lingers on the name, drawing it out very slowly, like he savors the sound of it. Padmé wishes with every part of her that Anakin could have been a father, but he threw it all away when he pledged himself to Palpatine. All possibility of that is gone now.

"I would always imagine that he would have grown up to look like you," Padmé muses. Her heart flutters at the thought of her son—because she knows he is alive, somewhere in the deserts of Tatooine, and that he is safe from the Dark Side and from the Empire. "Fair hair and soft blue eyes."

But Vader ruins the moment, of course. His voice sounds bitter when he speaks. "I don't look like that anymore," he says.

Padmé furrows her brow. Her spirits had slowly been raising, but now they have dropped back into the pit of her stomach. "I don't know what you look like now. Why won't you let me see your face?" she asks him.

"No," is all he says in response. His words are defensive now, guarded. Padmé shouldn't have said anything. "I already told you what Obi-Wan did to me."

Padmé bites down on her lip, unsure if she should dare say what she wants to say. If she pushes it, she could unleash Vader's anger. But she could also appeal to Anakin's reason. "It hasn't ever occurred to you that your injuries could be healed?"

"All that can be done has been done," he tries to shut Padmé down.

But she shakes her head. "I've seen rebels in worse shape than you. There was a man once who returned from a mission with none of his limbs. He had been burned severely in an explosion, and even parts of his face had been burned away. His lungs had also been damaged—some medics thought he wouldn't make it."

"My facial features are still intact," Vader retorts defensively. He seems to take offense that Padmé implied otherwise.

"But my point," Padmé continues, "is that that man was healed. He had skin grafts, among several other procedures for his burns, facial reconstruction, and even his hair was restored. His limbs were replaced by mechanical prosthetics, and even his lungs were repaired. It took a lot of time, but medical technology advances more and more almost every day. Have you been in that suit for nineteen years?"

Vader only nods. It only confirms Padmé's statement even more; if Vader's suit has not changed, then Palpatine is certainly trying to disadvantage him. He has enslaved him to that suit, she realizes, in order to keep him forever a servant of the Empire.

"The Emperor is—" Padmé hesitates. Should she go there? If she plants seeds of doubt in Vader towards his master, perhaps it could set him back on the right path. "I just think the Emperor is lying to you. Probably so you won't overthrow him. He wants to keep you weak, he—"

Vader raises his hand, cutting Padmé off abruptly. "That's enough," he interrupts. "My master is not treacherous like Obi-Wan was. I owe him my life."

"You should think about what I said," Padmé insists. "Palpatine isn't exactly benevolent." She purposely tries to avoid referring to him as the Emperor, for he is not *her* ruler, and he

never will be.

It has been a few hours since he spoke with Padmé. She is in her room now, completely oblivious to the events unfolding in the control room of the Death Star.

Princess Leia stands in front of Darth Vader, her hands bound by metal cuffs. Alderaan can be seen in the distance from the window of the control room; Vader can feel the princess's apprehension and fear as she anticipates the worst.

Tarkin approaches them, a smug look on his face. But Princess Leia does not seem phased, at least not on the outside, even though she must know her home planet is in danger.

"Governor Tarkin, I should have expected to find you holding Vader's leash. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought on board," she snarks.

Vader would have laughed if the princess was more likeable, and if it were not unprofessional. She certainly is bold, he has to give her that much credit. She has a spirit much like Padmé's, stubborn and strong.

"Charming, to the last," Tarkin says in response. He places his hand on the princess's chin, forcing her to look him in the eye. "It will be quite the relief when you and your rebel friends are no longer a thorn in the Empire's side."

The princess scoffs and rolls her eyes. Princess Leia jerks her head away from Tarkin's hand so that he releases her. She opens her mouth to say something, but Tarkin is not finished.

"Princess Leia, I would like you to be my guest at a ceremony that will make this battle station operational. No star system will dare oppose the Emperor now," Tarkin declares proudly.

Vader listens, quite amused, as the princess fires back at Tarkin. "The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers." He wonders where her attitude comes from—certainly, not from Bail or Breha Organa. Padmé must have been a strong influence on her growing up.

"Not after we demonstrate the power of this station. In a way, you have determined the choice of the planet that'll be destroyed first," Tarkin says callously. "Since you are reluctant to provide us with the location of the rebel base, I have chosen to test this station's destructive power on your home planet of Alderaan."

Princess Leia's Force signature shifts from defiance and bravery to absolute turmoil and desperation. If only he could see the shock unfold on her features.

"No!" she protests frantically. "Alderaan is peaceful, we have no weapons. You can't possibly—"

Tarkin cuts off her plea. "You would prefer another target? A military target? Then name the system!" he demands, glowering at the princess.

When Princess Leia hesitates, Tarkin comes nearer to her, glaring. "I grow tired of asking this, so it'll be the last time. *Where is the rebel base?*"

She stares at Alderaan, her eyes wide and fearful. Vader can feel the tumult within her, the chaos in her mind and in her heart. She must be at war with herself, trying to decide whether she should give in for the sake of her home planet or remain defiant to the Empire. Vader silently places his bet on the latter.

Finally, the princess responds to Tarkin's question. "Dantooine," she answers quietly. She lowers her head, feigning defeat. "They're on Dantooine."

Needless to say, Vader does not buy it.

"There. You see, Lord Vader, she can be reasonable," Tarkin says to him. But Vader believes even Tarkin must know deep down that the princess is lying to them.

"Continue with the operation," the Grand Moff says to the officer at the Death Star's controls. "You may fire when ready."

"What?" Princess Leia shouts in disbelief. Waves of shake and panic overtake her as the despair sinks in that she will witness the end of her planet.

Vader does not mourn Alderaan. After all, today, he will see Bail Organa's end. The man who dared set his sights on *his* wife—Vader is more than thrilled to know that he will die.

"You're far too trusting," Tarkin remarks to the princess. "Dantooine is far too remote to make an effective demonstration. But don't worry, we will deal with your rebel friends soon enough."

It is not truly about the princess, Vader believes. Tarkin wants to show the galaxy the true might of the Empire; the fact that it is the princess's home planet being destroyed is only a bonus. He has a feeling that Tarkin would test the Death Star's power on any planet within their reach, military or not, just to prove a point.

"No!" Princess Leia protests once more. She moves forward, but Vader holds her back by her shoulder with his hand, pressing her back against him. The princess recoils from him, trying to break free of his grasp, but he only tightens his grip on her. He holds her a few inches away from him now, keeping her glued in place.

She has got to be the most uncooperative, frustrating prisoner he has ever encountered.

The men at the controls pull a lever and push numerous buttons. Several red, white, and green lights at the controls panels begin to flash as the Death Star commences its attack on Alderaan. Tarkin stares eagerly at the planet, clearly ecstatic at the sheer power that will be released by the Death Star.

Princess Leia, on the other hand, is holding her breath. The tension within her is reaching a breaking point—a breaking point that will certainly be reached once Alderaan is destroyed. He anticipates a meltdown of some sorts, and he suspects it will be satisfying to see the princess's strong exterior crumble.

The Death Star's lasers gather into a single point, and within a mere few seconds, it blasts all the way to the planet of Alderaan. With one swift line of fire, Alderaan explodes into a million pieces, its inferno surrounded by a blazing white ring as the explosion expands into space.

A million voices cry out in sheer terror, but then they are suddenly silenced.

And just like that, an entire civilization and culture that stood for thousands of years, not to mention Bail Organa, has been wiped from the galaxy. It is an amazing, intoxicating power.

A darkness suddenly pools and festers in the Force. There is a great void that opens within the ancient energy field, and Vader can feel it, just as any other Force user in the galaxy can feel it. But it does not break Vader down or weaken him. That spreading darkness invigorates him, makes him feel more alive—it signifies the victory of the Dark Side once more over the Force and the galaxy.

Princess Leia quite literally collapses. She would have fallen to the floor if Vader had not caught her; something inside of her has finally snapped, and she lost the strength to stand. He holds her up and drags her towards the exit, turning her away from the sight of the asteroid field that has been created by Alderaan's destruction. It isn't an act of mercy, but an act of necessity. The princess is not going to watch anymore, and she does not need to. What has needed to be done is done.

Once in the hallway and flanked by a group of Stormtroopers, Princess Leia picks up her feet. Vader doesn't release his hold on her, but he no longer has to drag her down the corridor. But then suddenly, the princess struggles against him, slamming her back against him and knocking her head against his chest plate. That must have been painful for her, but she pays no mind.

"Let me go!" she demands. The princess isn't crying, but her voice cracks despite her anger. "Get your hands off me and *let me go!*"

He doesn't. Despite her loud protests, Vader continues to force her down the hallway and all the way to the elevator that leads to the Detention Center. The princess struggles the whole way there, cursing and kicking. He would choke her to shut her up if it didn't violate his agreement with Padmé.

When they finally reach the Detention Center, Vader is more than tired of the princess's outburst. He quite literally throws her into her cell, but she braces herself against the wall so she doesn't fall to the floor. Before Vader can close her cell door, Princess Leia turns to him and glares as harshly as she can manage. An inferno blazes in her dark eyes; he can feel her hatred for him permeating through the Force in a dark cloud.

"*I hate you!*" she shouts venomously. "When the Alliance wins the war, I hope they publicly execute you, and I hope it's—"

But Vader doesn't listen to the rest. He simply presses the button to close the princess's cell door and then stalks away. He should be feeling victorious, but instead he is only irritated by an insolent rebel teenager.

chapter vi: the rescue.

“She lied! She *lied* to us!” Tarkin exclaims. He seems genuinely surprised, but Vader is not shocked at the news.

Grand Moff Tarkin and Darth Vader are standing in the conference room on the Death Star. Tarkin has just been informed by an officer that only an abandoned base was found on Dantooine, and that the rebels are no longer present there.

“I told you she would never consciously betray the Rebellion.” It’s Vader own way of saying, ‘I told you so.’ With the way the princess resisted his interrogation methods, it should have been quite obvious that she would not break. Still, it is rather impressive that she allowed her planet to be destroyed in favor of the Rebellion’s safety.

Tarkin scowls at him. “And *why* can’t we terminate her? She should die for lying to us, Vader.”

“You achieved your objective, Tarkin,” Vader tells him coolly. “The Death Star’s power has now been demonstrated. And we will never know the location of the rebel base if we kill her now.”

The Grand Moff sighs in frustration and defeat. Vader can see the vexation on his face; Tarkin would love nothing more than for Princess Leia to die, but Vader can’t allow that.

“I suppose you are right,” he gives in. “But what is the true reason you want the princess alive, Vader? You seem very adamant about ensuring her life.”

“Do you question my intentions?” Vader inquires harshly. He doesn’t like to be regulated; only the Emperor himself has the power to truly give him orders.

“Your behavior lately is just strange,” Tarkin shrugs. “Does it have to do with Amidala? Is that why you seem to be protecting the princess?” The Grand Moff is careful with his words, but his tone is definitely more accusatory than curious. Vader can sense his suspicion as well, and he doesn’t take kindly to it. He supposes that his behavior is odd, and it isn’t much of a surprise that Tarkin has caught on. It is quite strange, after all, to keep a ‘prisoner’ in a room rather than a cell, and to not use a torture device on them. But it angers him nevertheless; Tarkin should know better than to question his authority.

When Vader does not answer quickly enough, Tarkin continues. “Did Amidala ask you to keep the princess alive? They were captured together; their relationship may be stronger than she has let on.”

“Amidala is none of your concern,” Vader replies sharply. He hopes that Tarkin will stop there, but to his dismay, he doesn’t.

“Just remember where your loyalties should lie,” says Tarkin, his pale eyes narrowed.

Vader would have snapped his neck if he wasn’t such a highly ranked Imperial. The Emperor would surely punish him if he killed Tarkin; that is the *only* reason Vader is able to

behave himself. In all nineteen of his years as Darth Vader, no one had ever questioned his loyalty to the Empire. Not even the Emperor himself.

“*My loyalty*,” Vader snarls. “Is to the *Empire*. It is not your place to question that.”

Now the Grand Moff is glaring at him with icy eyes. “Just don’t let your personal feelings get in the way of your responsibility to the Empire.” Tarkin chastises him like a *child*, and Vader will not tolerate such things. He hasn’t been spoken to like this since he was a Jedi.

“I’m *not*,” insists Vader. “Why don’t you mind yourself, Tarkin, rather than scrutinize my every move? I assure you, none of my actions will negatively impact the Empire.”

Before Tarkin can argue any further, the intercom on the conference table buzzes. “Yes?” Tarkin answers.

“We’ve captured a freighter entering the remains of the Alderaan system. It’s markings match those that blasted its way out of Mos Eisley,” a man on the other end of the intercom informs Tarkin.

Mos Eisley—*Tatooine*. That was where the princess had sent the Death Star plans, and it could be no coincidence that the same ship was now trying to visit Alderaan, Princess Leia’s home planet.

“They must be trying to return the stolen plans to the princess. See, Tarkin? She can still be useful to us.” Vader sounds rather smug as he speaks, and satisfaction swells within him as he sees the irritation flicker over Tarkin’s features.

“Just go oversee the investigation of the ship, Vader,” sighs Tarkin.

Vader doesn’t say anything more. He just turns and leaves to head down to the docking bay where the freighter ship is held.

As much as Padmé wants to redeem her husband, as much as she wants to believe in him, she has her doubts. She knows that she cannot put her faith in Vader to truly protect Leia. He would keep her alive, perhaps, but what kind of life would Leia be living if she were kept a prisoner? Vader would never release her; she’d just be wasting away in a cell.

If Leia conveniently escaped, Darth Vader would immediately trace it back to Padmé. But what could he really do to her? Vader won’t hurt her—she’s sure of that. Perhaps she would be confined to her room and be barred from exploring the ship with Vader, but Padmé could live with that.

She’s been contemplating deeply in her room ever since Vader left her alone. Padmé still isn’t sure how exactly she would free Leia, but she supposes she could use her credentials as Vader’s companion to get her through Death Star security. The trouble with that is Padmé isn’t sure of how far word has spread, and how much most Imperial men would be aware of.

And there would certainly be grave consequences if she failed to free Leia. Vader may call off their deal altogether and try to kill their daughter, in which case, Padmé would be forced to tell him that he is her father. She desperately hopes that it will not come to that.

Padmé decides to take the risk. She believes that she can succeed; she has rarely ever failed a mission in her time as both a Senator of the Republic and a general of the Rebel Alliance.

There would be guards stationed outside of her room, no doubt. She had seen them when Vader escorted her out of her room and back. Perhaps, if Padmé told them that she is allowed to leave and that they must accompany her, they would believe her. And with a pair of Imperial guards at her side, she may not be questioned upon entering the Detention Center. She just had to sell her lie, and using their fear of Darth Vader against them should do the trick.

Padmé is still dressed in her deep navy senatorial gown as she was earlier in the day. She is well put together, with her elegant dress and her hair, which is held neatly in place with her gold headband, tumbling down her back. Her appearance perpetuates an air of sophistication and authority—exactly what she is going for.

Her heart is pounding in her chest when she presses the button to open the doors. She exits her room, a nonchalant expression on her face. The two guards turn to look at her, confusion painted across their faces.

“My... my lady?” one of them, the guard on the right, questions tentatively.

“I have permission from Lord Vader to visit Princess Leia in the Detention Center,” Padmé tells them as a matter of factly. She maintains a very serious, tranquil expression, careful not to betray her nervousness.

“What? He never informed us of this,” the other guard says. His tone is skeptical, but also respectful. She highly doubts the guards would ever intend to show her anything but respect; they must certainly be aware of the consequences if they didn’t.

“Lord Vader informed me that all I would have to do is ask the two of you to escort me to the Detention Center,” Padmé lies.

“Where... where is Lord Vader?” the guard to Padmé’s left inquires. They both seem rather uneasy and unsure; all they would need was a little more of a push, and they would surely oblige to Padmé’s request.

“He is in a conference with Grand Moff Tarkin,” replies Padmé.

She bats her eyes innocently, and then narrows them. “Surely, you would not want to upset Lord Vader,” Padmé says. “I am sure he would not be pleased if you denied me a visit to the princess. She is a very dear friend of mine, and Lord Vader promised me a visit to her today.”

The guards look at each other skeptically. One of them says to the other, “Vader would be upset, you know. She’s important to him.”

Padmé’s heart convulses—she is *important* to him, they had said. If even an Imperial guard could see that... no, she shouldn’t get her hopes up like that. Although she wants to believe otherwise, Padmé is still unsure of Vader’s emotional state, especially when it comes to her. She may be important to him, but in what way? The fear that he might not truly love her is consuming, but Padmé tries to contain herself in front of the guards.

“You’re right,” the guard replies to his partner. They both then turn to Padmé. “Alright, my lady, we will escort you to the Detention Center.”

She smiles cordially. “Thank you.”

The elevator opens to the Detention Center. Luke Skywalker and Han Solo are dressed in Stormtrooper uniforms, with Chewbacca in tow. They have placed handcuffs around the Wookiee’s wrists to give the impression that he is a prisoner, allowing them easy access to the Detention Center.

When the Millennium Falcon was pulled in by the Death Star’s tractor beam, Luke had no clue they would be commencing a rescue mission. He knows he’s in way over his head, not that he would ever admit that out loud. But after watching the princess’s message to Ben, he couldn’t just leave her with the Empire. Luke knows enough about the Empire to be fully aware that they wouldn’t keep the princess alive for long. The Empire does not like to keep their prisoners.

By not saving the princess, he’d be possibly damning the galaxy to an eternal Imperial reign.

Luke, Han, and Chewie step out of the elevator together. They both have blasters on their belts, prepared to attack at any moment. Luke knew they were heading into a fight when they made this rescue plan, and he is willing to follow through with it—even if it means that he has to kill the Imperials in the Detention Center.

The man at the circular control panel of the Detention Center stops what he was doing and looks at them, confusion written all over his face. He takes a step forward and clasps his hands behind his back.

“Where are you taking this... *thing*?” he asks suspiciously, his eyes narrowed.

“Prisoner transfer from cell block 1138,” Luke answers quickly, making up a random cell number in his head.

But the officer before them doesn’t seem to buy it. “I wasn’t notified...” he trails off when another officer approaches him.

“Sir, I thought we were expecting Amidala? Not... a Wookiee prisoner.” He tries to keep his voice hushed, but he is still within earshot of Luke.

So, someone else was scheduled... Luke knows that is not good news. He turns to Han and nods—they would need to act soon if they were going to pull this plan off.

The officer just shrugs in response to his comrade. “I’ll have to clear it,” he says simply. He turns to his console and punches a few buttons, and the other officer who questioned him begins to walk back to his post.

While both officers are occupied, Han unfastens Chewbacca’s bindings, and the Wookiee lets out a great roar.

“Look out, it’s loose!” yells an Imperial.

Luke quickly hands Chewbacca an extra blaster. The Wookiee runs forward, charging the officer at the console, and Han and Luke begin to fire their blasters at the guards in the room. A few Imperials go down, and the two young men dodge several blaster shots. They knock into one another, and Han elbows Luke in the ribcage. Luckily, though, he was protected by armor.

“Kid! Watch where you’re going!” Han shouts, and continues to fire at the remaining guards.

While Han handles the rest of the Imperials, Luke locates the cameras in the room and shoots them down. Most likely, though, the Death Star’s surveillance team has already seen them in the Detention Center. They don’t have much time, Luke realizes.

Another Imperial officer begins to charge at them from the hallway that leads to the cells, but Luke exclaims, “Look out!” and Han fires at him before he can do any damage. The man falls to the floor and tumbles down the stairs.

Once the chaos has been resolved and only Luke, Han, and Chewbacca are left standing, Han and Luke rush to the console. Han pushes the body of an Imperial officer off of the console, revealing a blinking communicator.

“We’ve got to find out which cell this princess of yours is in,” Han says, punching in commands into the computer at the console. “Here it is... cell 2187, you go get her. I’ll hold them here.”

Luke nods and runs off into the corridor. He quickly scans the numbers on the cells as he rushes by. 2160, 2166, 2175, 2183...

He stops dead in his tracks when he finally spots cell 2187. Just as he is about to press the button to open the cell, Han yells down the hallway, “Luke! We’re gonna have company!”

Luke’s heart jolts in his chest. *They must be sending a squad up to investigate*, he thinks. *Shit, shit, shit, this is not good. This was a terrible plan.*

He punches the button of the princess’s cell and the doors slide open, revealing a small woman in a white dress, laying on a metal bench. She looks just as she did in the hologram she sent, beautiful, young, and of course, with the double buns on either side of her hair.

Princess Leia groggily opens her eyes and holds herself up by one elbow, raising an eyebrow at Luke. He stares at her for a moment, dumbfounded by her beauty.

“Aren’t you a little short for a Stormtrooper?” she remarks.

“Huh?” Luke exclaims. But then he realizes—of course, he’s still wearing his disguise. ‘Oh, the uniform,’ he says, removing his helmet to reveal his face and blonde hair. “I’m Luke Skywalker, I’m here to rescue you,” Luke tells the princess, dropping his helmet on the ground.

“You’re who?” inquires Princess Leia, who now stands up from her seat on the bench.

“I’m here to *rescue* you,” Luke says with more urgency in his voice. They would have to hurry, before it was too late, and he needs to get the princess to come with him *now*. There isn’t much time for questions. “I’ve got your R2 unit, I’m here with Ben Kenobi,” he explains further, hoping that will suffice for evidence to the princess that he is an ally, not an enemy.

“Ben Kenobi!” she repeats, her eyes lighting up with hope. “Where is he?”

“Come on!” Luke nods his head to the door, and the two of them run outside. Just as they are heading down the hallway, Princess Leia stops.

There is a pained expression on her face, and she turns and looks at Luke with worry. He stops beside her, wondering why she has stopped.

“Wait,” she gasps. “Padmé... we have to get Padmé.”

“Who?”

“Padmé! She was captured with me,” Leia explains. “I can’t leave her behind.”

“Okay, okay,” agrees Luke, not wanting to put them at risk and wait any longer. “We’ll—we’ll figure out a plan to save her, just... let’s focus on getting out of here for now.”

Leia nods, but Luke sees a twinkle of reluctance in her eyes.

The two of them emerge from the hallway to meet Han and Chewbacca back at the console.

“Princess,” Han greets Leia with a quick nod. “Let’s get the hell out of here before the squad of troopers they’re sending arrives.”

“We need to go somewhere we can look up the location of other prisoners,” says Leia. “We’ve got to find Padmé, but Vader took her somewhere else. I know she’s here, but I just don’t know exactly where. There’s so many different Detention Centers...”

“How do you know she’s even on the Death Star?” Luke asks her. If they were separated, this Padmé that Leia is searching for could have easily been sent to an Imperial prison on a planet. For Leia’s sake, though, and for theirs, he hoped that Padmé is here, and that they would be able to find her.

Leia shakes her head and sighs. “I can’t explain it, but I just *know*,” she tells him.

“Is she part of the Rebellion or something?” Han asks, crossing his arms. Luke can already tell by the sour look on his face that he isn’t pleased about the princess suggesting they rescue yet another prisoner.

“Yes, she’s a general, and she’s my *friend*,” says Leia, placing her hands on her hips. “I’m not going anywhere without her.”

“We could just leave you *and* her behind,” Han suggests, but Luke knows he isn’t serious. As much as Han likes to appear like he has a heart of stone, Luke doesn’t truly think he would let Leia die here, especially after going through so much trouble to rescue her.

“I’m going to save Padmé, or I’ll die trying,” declares Leia defiantly. She seems very set on this new course of action, and Luke doesn’t dare argue. Besides, if he were Leia, he would want to save his friend, too.

“Yeah well you might just kill us all in the process!” snaps Han.

Luke’s eyes widen as the elevator opens, revealing a woman and a pair of Imperial guards. His heart jolts in his chest—they had sent reinforcements? *Already*? Leia and Han’s backs are

turned, so Luke is the only one who is aware of their new company.

“Luke, come on, kid, back me up on this!” Han urges him, but his words go through Luke’s ear and out the other. Rather than respond to Han, he raises his weapon cautiously at the one of the guards, and Han, Leia, and Chewie whip around to see who Luke is aiming at.

The Imperial guards rush out of the elevator, poised to strike, their blasters pointing at Luke and his friends. The woman follows them, her eyes darting from Luke to Leia and back again. There is bewilderment written all over her face, but Luke figures it’s because of all the bodies on the floor.

The woman is dressed far better than anyone Luke has seen on the Death Star. If he didn’t have better senses, if they weren’t in a life or death situation right now, he would have stood there in awe; she was extraordinarily beautiful, even more so than Princess Leia. She must be years older than the princess, however, perhaps closer to Han’s age, late twenties or early thirties.

She wears a regal navy-blue gown that pools around her on the floor. As she takes a tentative step forward, her dress ripples smoothly, like dark water. Her dark hair is long and falls past her shoulders in loose, elegant curls. And she has eyes like the princess’s, dark, kind, but also full of steel and strength.

Her facial features are very feminine, almost delicate in some ways, and elegant, with soft, straight brows, a thin nose, and an angular jawline with defined cheekbones.

Luke realizes he is staring, because the woman is looking right back at him. She seems almost as stunned as he is, and he quickly looks away to hide his embarrassment. He knows it can be perceived as rude to stare at someone, but he was just surprised to see someone dressed like a queen in a Death Star.

But they aren’t the only ones in shock—Leia emits a little gasp and exclaims, “*Padmé?*”

The woman doesn’t respond, but she steps in front of the them before either groups can shoot. *What is she doing?* Luke wonders to himself. *Is she trying to get herself killed? And why is she with the Imperials in the first place?* She doesn’t seem to be armed, but he has a feeling Han can be a little trigger-happy sometimes. She isn’t wearing binders, either, which gives Luke a doubtful feeling, since Leia claimed she is a part of the Alliance and is a prisoner of the Empire.

“My lady, please move out of the way,” the guard tells her.

“*My lady?*” Han repeats. He turns to Leia, his face screwed up in suspicion. “I thought you said she was a prisoner!”

“Don’t shoot, them, please,” the woman tells the guards. “Let them... explain. There might be more to the story here.”

“But, my lady, if Vader finds out we *didn’t* shoot intruders who were obviously freeing the princess—” one of the guard starts, but Padmé cuts him off.

“I promise you...” she casts a brief glance at Leia, who nods to her. They seem to be communicating silently, because Leia then lightly elbows Han to get his attention. Leia

gestures with a short nod of her head to the pair of guards, and Han seems to get the message. So does Luke.

Oh, Luke thinks. *She's buying us time to shoot them.* Does that mean that this woman was on their side, even if Imperials referred to her as 'my lady?' He isn't completely sure of what to think of her, but she seems to be trying to save them, not get them killed. And if Luke denies her help, he is sure he'd end up dead for it.

"I won't allow Vader to harm either of you. If I tell him you were just doing your job and protecting me, nothing bad will happen to you," the woman tells the two guards. Luke furrows his brow—*they're her security detail.* They are *her* guards, assigned to her by Darth Vader himself. What would a prisoner be doing with Imperial guards of her own?

He doesn't have time to contemplate that too deeply right now. So, instead, he and Han do what they're supposed to, and fire at the two guards simultaneously. They both drop to the floor, blaster holes in their head.

The woman turns to them with a solemn sigh. "Unfortunately, their deaths were necessary," she says. "They never would have let me go."

"Padmé, Mother of Moons!" Leia exclaims. The princess runs forward and throws her arms around the woman. She returns the princess's embrace, wrapping her arms protectively around Leia, as if she is a small child.

"I thought... I was so afraid I would never see you again," says Leia once she pulls away from Padmé. It is a heart-warming scene, and Luke smiles to himself, glad that the princess was able to be reunited with her friend.

"I'm alright. I'm glad you're okay, as well, I was just coming down here to break you out..."

So *that's* why they suddenly ran into Leia's friend. But still, the circumstances were odd. Leia had told them she was a General of the Rebellion, but she had Imperial guards. But he supposes they would have time for those questions later—still, he can't help his mind from wandering.

"Alright, alright, that's a nice reunion and all, but we've gotta get going, sisters," Han interrupts them. He then points to Leia accusingly. "You better explain what the hell is going on, though, sweetheart—but we don't have time for that right now."

"Padmé, right?" Luke says. Padmé nods and smiles weakly, almost sheepishly, at him. 'I'm Luke Skywalker, and the rude one there is Han Solo.' He pauses as Padmé breathes in sharply at the mention of his full name, that same shock he saw on her face earlier reappearing. *Does she know me? Do I know her, and I just don't remember?* Luke wonders. Now isn't the time to ask such questions, though, so Luke continues to speak, despite his curiosity. "And, uh, the Wookiee's name is Chewie. We—"

"The squad of troopers they're sending will be here any minute now," interjects Han. He looks at Padmé with narrowed eyes. "Since you're so close with the Imps, do you know a way out of here?"

"There's only one way—through the elevator," says Padmé, pursing her lips with vexation. Luke is sure she doesn't appreciate Han's comment, but she doesn't say anything for now.

Instead, she crouches to the floor and grabs a pair of metal orbs that were attached to each of the guards' belts.

"These should help," she tells them, rising back up from the floor. Padmé shows them what she has, and Luke widens his eyes in shock. They were *grenades*—could they really trust a woman they don't know with such dangerous weapons? And why were her guards so heavily armed?

"They had grenades?" Leia says. She seems to be thinking the same thing as Luke, because even she looks skeptical now. "Those were *assassin class* guards?"

Luke isn't entirely sure what that means, as he doesn't know the Imperial military like Leia does, but he can assume that the guards were specially trained.

"So, you're gonna throw grenades while wearing that fancy dress and save our skins, huh?" snarks Han, putting his hands on his hips skeptically. "You're not exactly dressed for action, sister."

Padmé furrows her brow at Han. "I'm quite functional no matter my attire," she retorts. "Besides, I'm wearing something else underneath this. I thought I might encounter some action while trying to save Leia, but I couldn't leave my room in combat clothing, or my guards would have been suspicious."

Her room, her guards—Luke is fairly certain as this point that Padmé was not truly a prisoner aboard the Death Star. If she hadn't been given a cell like Leia, then she was more of a guest than anything. She doesn't even try to hide it; she must know that this was very obvious the moment her guards referred to her as 'my lady.'

"Now, if we're done scrutinizing my fashion choices, let's *go*," Padmé orders. Han's face turns bitter again and he mutters something to Chewbacca, who gargles incomprehensibly. Luke chuckles under his breath; Padmé is admirably bold, and he appreciates her sass towards Han. He deserves it, in Luke's opinion.

Suddenly, smoke erupts into the air as a gaping hole is blasted through the wall of the Detention Center. Several Stormtroopers emerge from the opening and begin firing at the five of them. They retreat into the hallway for cover, and Han shouts frantically, "Get behind me, get behind me!"

Leia and Padmé are both unarmed, save for the grenades that Padmé has, so Han, Luke, and Chewbacca are the ones who fire in return at the Stormtroopers. They manage to take several of them down, but it is not enough. Luke's heart is hammering away in his chest, and his breathing has become quick and uneven. He knows there's a possibility they might die here, and that thought terrifies him. But he doesn't allow that fear to consume him, and instead continues to bravely defend himself and his comrades.

He hears Padmé say to Leia behind him, "Hold these." A few moments pass by—Luke, Han, and Chewie are still firing at the Stormtroopers—and then Padmé says, "Everyone, stand back." Blaster fire flashes towards them, but none of it reaches them; they stay pressed against the walls to avoid it.

Luke looks to Padmé, who now wears a white bodysuit with beige boots and a belt to match. There's fabric tied around her waist, too, of the same beige color of her boots and belt

—it must be a cape or a hood of some sort. Her blue gown is on the floor, and Luke realizes now what she meant when she said she was wearing something more suitable for combat underneath her dress. She must have been wearing the boots the entire time, though.

She holds the pair of grenades in her hand. Padmé glances at both Luke and Leia, and then presses the button to detonate the grenade. It begins to beep, and Padmé quickly throws it into the horde of Stormtroopers.

chapter vii: master and apprentice.

“Come on!” Padmé urges everyone forward. They step over a multitude of armored bodies, some of which are obliterated or missing limbs. The smoke rising from the floor is beginning to become suffocating; Padmé takes short, shallow breaths to avoid breathing it all in.

The five of them approach the elevator, and Han presses one of the buttons to take them to the floor that the Millennium Falcon is on.

“Are we going to find Ben, Han?” Luke asks.

“Ben?” inquires Padmé. They had come here with yet another person?

“Ben Kenobi,” her son replies. “He’s a Jedi Master.”

Padmé’s heart flutters with hope. Obi-Wan. He’s alive and well, but if he’s on the Death Star, then... A cold wave washes over Padmé. She knows that if Obi-Wan is on the battle station, Vader must sense his presence. He is likely seeking him out right now, hunting him down through the Force...

She doesn’t have to ask herself whether Darth Vader would kill his old master. She knows the answer right away.

“What is he doing here?” she asks Luke, a worried look crossing her face. As she says this, the elevator door slides open, and the five of them step in. “And where is he?”

When the door closes, Luke answers, “It’s a long story—I’ll explain more back on the ship. Right now, though, he’s deactivating the tractor beam on our ship so we can get out of here.”

They assume I’m coming with them, Padmé thinks to herself. She hasn’t quite decided if she’s going to stay or not. If she left, she would be with her son and daughter, but that also meant leaving Anakin to rot in his own darkness. She still believes that perhaps she can lead him back to the light, and if she stayed, this would be possible. But it would also mean isolation, separation from her children... not to mention the rebels might be blowing up the Death Star soon, since the plans would likely be sent to Yavin IV.

For now, she will at least see to it that her children, along with the Death Star plans, escape from the Empire’s grasp. She is still in awe that she has been reunited with not just one, but both of her children—she hadn’t expected Luke to be here, but she is more than overjoyed that he is. She hasn’t seen him since he was a baby, after all.

Padmé steals a glance at her son, and her heart swells with pride for a moment. She wants to tear up and hug him, but she knows that he would only see it as strange; he doesn’t know the truth yet, and she doesn’t know when she will be able to tell him that she is his mother.

His skin is golden from Tatooine’s twin suns, and he has the same eyes as his father, crystal blue. (Eyes that Padmé longs to see again—eyes that are now forever hidden by a

mask.) His hair is dirty blonde, much like Anakin's had been when he lived on Tatooine as a child. Luke reminds Padmé of that little boy she once knew; he is kind, idealistic, but also very immature, just as Anakin had once been.

She only hopes that Luke did not inherit *too much* of his father.

"But, in short," Luke continues, pulling Padmé out of her thoughts, "this R2 unit led me to Ben, and we found a pilot, Han, to take us to Alderaan."

So Artoo is here, with the plans, she concludes with relief. *Thank the Force he isn't lost.*

"How did you end up here, if you were going to Alderaan?" questions Padmé.

A shadow falls over Luke's face. He shifts uncomfortably and casts a glance at Han, who just shrugs. There's something Padmé is missing, but she doesn't know what. Judging by the grave expression on her son's face, it is definitely not good news.

"It's a topic for another time, Padmé," Leia says through gritted teeth. Anguish fills her voice, and Padmé's brow furrows with concern. "We've got to focus on getting out of here."

Padmé catches her daughter's eye for a moment. Only minutes ago, her daughter's face had been full of steely determination, but now it was just solemn. The ghost of grief dances in her eyes, and it fills Padmé with dread. Something is very, very wrong; a weight drops down onto her heart. But she decides it's better not to talk about it right now, considering they're about to run headfirst into a battle with Stormtroopers once that door opens.

Silence engulfs the elevator, and Padmé takes the opportunity to untie her cape from her waist and fasten it onto her shoulders. Now that her belt is more visible, she realizes that she doesn't have a blaster on her; she had neglected to pick one up while in the Detention Center. After all, she had been more concerned with collecting the grenades. She has tucked the remaining grenade into a pocket of her belt; they would likely need it on their journey to the ship.

Luke raises his commlink up to his mouth and says, "Threepio, do you copy?"

Padmé looks at her son, who listens intently for the droid's response. Of course, she should have assumed that C-3PO was here with R2-D2; the two had always been inseparable.

"Yes, Master Luke?" Threepio's voice answers.

"Wait for us at the docking bay," Luke commands him. "We're heading down there."

"We will be right there, Master Luke."

The elevator finally stops, and the doors open, revealing a mostly vacant hallway, save for a strange droid that resembles a toaster. It emits a squealing noise, almost like it is sounding off its own alarm, and wheels away as quickly as it can once it spots the five of them exit the elevator.

Han aims his blaster at the toaster-like droid. "That thing's probably going to alert the Imperials," he says gruffly.

"No! Wait, they'll hear!" Leia tries to stop him, but Han fires anyway. The sound of his blaster echoes through the hallway, and Padmé flinches at the sound. There's no doubt in her

mind that at least a few Stormtroopers or officers heard that.

She screws up her face at Han, but before she can get a word out, Leia beats her to it. “Listen, I don’t know who you are, or where you come from,” she says sharply, her eyes full of disdain, “but from now on, you do as I tell you. Okay?”

Han raises his eyebrows, seemingly unsure of whether Leia *really* just said that to him. Padmé’s heart swells with pride at the boldness of her daughter. *She got that from me*, she thinks, almost chuckling to herself.

“Listen, Your Worshipfulness, let’s get one thing straight! I take orders from one person—*me!*” He points his finger at himself.

“It’s a wonder you’re still alive,” Leia snaps in return. “Come on, Padmé, let’s go this way,” she gestures to the left, the opposite direction of where the droid was headed.

As Leia begins to walk, however, Chewbacca stands in her path. She huffs in frustration and exclaims, “Will somebody get this big walking carpet out of my way!” Leia storms away, Padmé treading behind her, but she isn’t too far away to hear what Han says to Luke.

“No reward is worth *this*.”

Padmé shakes her head. Han is quite the mercenary—and not in a good way. (Though, admittedly, part of her does find his rough, sarcastic attitude quite amusing.) She wonders how Obi-Wan and Luke ever became mixed up with such a man, but then again, they were on Tatooine. Han wouldn’t even be considered close to scum on that awful, crime-ridden planet.

When Han begins to venture to the left, Leia stops him. “We should try to avoid going that way,” Leia tells him. “There’s more Imperial traffic there. I recognize this floor; I know where we are.”

For a while after that, they continue swiftly down the hallway, staying very alert as they watch out for any Imperials.

After a few entanglements with Stormtroopers, the group had made it to the floor above the docking bay. Padmé had picked up a Stormtrooper’s blaster along the way, and now held it so that it rested across her chest.

They pass by a window that overlooks the docking bay, and Padmé turns her head to look at the ship that her son arrived in. It is an old, beat-up freighter, but still an elegant ship nonetheless.

“There she is,” Han says proudly, catching Padmé looking at the ship. “The Millennium Falcon.”

Leia steps over to the window to peer down at the ship, and her eyebrows raise in surprise. “You came in that thing?” She turns to look at Han. “You’re braver than I thought,” she admits.

A slight grin pulls on Han’s lips, and he replies, “Nice, come on,” and begins to quickly walk down the hallway to the lower floor. Padmé, Leia, Luke, and Chewbacca follow, all of

them quite eager to reach the ship as soon as possible.

Padmé still isn't sure what she's going to tell them when they reach the ship—is she going to stay, or is she going to come with them? She doesn't know what Leia would think if she remained on the Death Star... or Obi-Wan, for that matter. Would they see her as a traitor to the Rebellion? Would she even see either her son or her daughter again if she refused to come with them?

They turn the corner, running right into a group of Stormtroopers. “There they are, blast them!” one of the troopers exclaims, and begin firing. Padmé quickly reacts, taking down three Stormtroopers with only a few shots.

“Get back!” Han shouts, and charges the Stormtroopers, shooting his blaster while he runs, Chewbacca in tow. The Stormtroopers retreat, shocked at Han's boldness—even Padmé is rather dumbfounded, absolutely in disbelief that Han would do something so foolishly brave.

“Where are you going? Come back!” Luke calls after him, but Han has already disappeared around a corner.

“He certainly has courage,” remarks Leia, almost in admiration. Padmé is starting to catch on that Han and Leia's bickering and comments towards each other may not be *just* out of annoyance. She smiles awkwardly to herself for a moment, blushing in chagrin at the thought of her daughter being attracted to the smuggler. Not that she could really blame her—Han Solo was a good looking man, but admittedly closer to Padmé's age than Leia's.

“What good will it do if he gets himself killed?” replies Luke, shaking his head. “Come on,” he beckons Leia and Padmé to the opposite direction Han went, and the three of them run down the hallway together.

It isn't long before they are found by Stormtroopers. “There's the intruders!” a trooper exclaims. Blaster fire is exchanged between them, and Padmé, Luke, and Leia retreat around the corner, heading to an open doorway.

Luke stops the moment the three of them pass through, and Padmé soon sees why. They find themselves at what seems to be a dead end; there is only a part of a walkway that leads across a chasm.

“I think we took a wrong turn!” her son exclaims, his voice slightly echoing through the room.

Padmé turns and punches a button to close the blast doors, temporarily blocking the Stormtroopers out. “Here,” she says. “One of these buttons should allow us to get across.”

She presses a red button, but nothing happens. When she tries another, she hears Luke say, “It worked!” Padmé turns to see that the walkway is extending, joining the two sides of the chasm.

“Let's go, before that door opens,” Leia says, and they quickly run across the bridge.

Vader walks silently, like an ominous shadow, down an empty corridor. He reaches out with all his senses; Obi-Wan is near, he can *feel* it. And when they do meet, he will strike him

down, finally enacting revenge on the man who crippled him for life.

He is near the hangar where the Millennium Falcon is docked when he sees a flash of white hair around a corner. Rather than pursuing Obi-Wan, Vader stops in his tracks, and sure enough, the old man reveals himself. The years have not been kind to his old master, but Vader recognizes him nevertheless. His hair has turned pale with age, his skin wrinkled and tanned by the harsh Tatooine sun. He wears brown and beige Jedi robes that similar to the ones he wore the last time they battled.

To Vader's dismay, he spots a twinkle in Kenobi's eyes. The old Jedi is not afraid. He is completely calm

An inferno of rage suddenly ignites within Vader. Nineteen years of built up hatred for Obi-Wan comes spilling out of whatever barrier was reigning it in, and Vader finds himself nearly shaking with fury. He draws his lightsaber, eager to cut down his old master. With his death would come a great triumph, and perhaps even some peace.

Anger and hatred burn through every fiber of his being as Vader steps forward threateningly, his bright Sith-red lightsaber humming as he moves. Obi-Wan ignites his own saber—it is still blue, indicating that it is the same lightsaber that he used to sever three of Vader's limbs.

"I've been waiting for you, Obi-Wan," growls Vader. "We meet again, at last."

Obi-Wan moves into an offensive position, his movements as graceful and elegant as they were in his youth. But this would be an easy battle; Obi-Wan's fighting style seems to have had little evolution, while Vader's technique has drastically changed over the years. He knows the way Obi-Wan fights—even after all this time, he never could have forgotten after spending over a decade under his training. But Vader may as well be a stranger to Obi-Wan; he was still the aggressor when it came to combat, but Sith fighting styles were very distinct from those of the Jedi.

"The circle is now complete," Vader continues, raising his lightsaber so that it is closer to Obi-Wan's. "When I left you, I was but the learner. Now *I* am the master."

He believes himself to be superior to Obi-Wan in every way. Not only is he stronger and younger, but he now wielded the Dark Side as a weapon, the most powerful side of the Force, on that Obi-Wan would never understand.

"Only a master of evil, Darth," replies Obi-Wan, and their lightsabers collide. Green flashes between their blades, the product of red and blue meeting in battle.

As the two of them continue to swing at one another, blocking the other's attacks each time, Vader becomes more and more aggressive, and Obi-Wan becomes more defensive in return.

Vader's lightsaber meets Obi-Wan's once more, and the two sabers growl against one another. He holds his old master there, pushing just enough to meet Obi-Wan's strength.

"You failed, Kenobi," Vader snarls through his mask, his rage absolutely boiling over now. He can't hold himself back; he lacks the emotional strength, especially when it comes to his former master. Obi-Wan has to pay for everything he did to him, and Vader decides that he will start by gloating over the Jedi's failed plan to keep Padmé from him.

“You never wanted me to know that Padmé was alive,” he continues. “Did you really think you could hide her from me forever?”

Their lightsabers part for a moment, but Obi-Wan slashes at him again. Vader blocks his attack effortlessly, their weapons locking mid-air.

Obi-Wan does not seem shocked by Vader’s words. He must have felt Padmé’s presence on the Death Star and known that Darth Vader had discovered her.

“I did what was necessary,” Obi-Wan replies simply. “Padmé doesn’t deserve the pain you will cause her.”

The pain he will cause her? Another burst of rage erupts within Vader and burns through his half-mechanical body like wildfire. Obi-Wan knows *nothing*—he would never intentionally harm Padmé. If the old man truly believes that, it just proves to Vader even more what an imbecile he is.

“I didn’t lie to her like you did,” retorts Vader harshly. “*You* are the one who has caused her pain. It has always been you, Obi-Wan. You tried to drive us apart years ago, and you have never stopped.”

Obi-Wan remains calm, despite Vader’s inflammatory accusations. It makes him want to *throw* something seeing Obi-Wan so tranquil, so at peace. He seems unbothered by anything Vader has said, so firm in his beliefs that Vader’s words mean nothing to him.

In his anger, he lunges forward, driving Obi-Wan back into the wall. He swings, just barely missing Obi-Wan’s shoulder and instead cutting a deep score into the wall that sears with embers.

As their lightsabers collide again and again, Vader seriously contemplates using the Force to fling Obi-Wan’s body into the wall.

“Your powers are weak, old man,” Vader taunts as their lightsabers lock once more.

“You can’t win, Darth,” says Obi-Wan with a confidence that makes Vader’s blood boil. “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.”

That is quite the overstatement, in Vader’s opinion, especially considering the fact that he can imagine *endless* power. The power of the Jedi is extremely limited compared to that of the Sith; Vader knows Obi-Wan is only trying to goad him.

“You are still nothing but a liar,” retorts Vader. “Some things never change.”

Their sabers break apart and clash again, hissing against one another as glaring green light sparks from the collision.

Eventually, Luke, Leia, Padmé, Han, and Chewbacca find their way back together, running into each other at a hallway that leads to the docking bay. From the doorway, they can see the Millennium Falcon, which is guarded by a group of Stormtroopers.

“What kept you?” Han asks them.

“We uh, ran into some old friends,” replies Leia.

“Is the ship alright?” inquires Luke.

“Seems okay, if we can get to it,” Han answers. “Let’s just hope the old man got the tractor beam out of commission.”

“Are we meeting him here?” she asks Han.

He nods. “Yeah, he should be near by now, if everything went according to plan.”

She only hopes that Obi-Wan and Vader’s paths did not cross, but it seems unlikely. Perhaps Obi-Wan was able to escape from Vader—she wouldn’t want either of them to die in battle.

If Obi-Wan killed Vader... she stops herself there. That’s a thought that it too painful to dwell on right now.

Suddenly, the Stormtroopers leave, running somewhere to the right of the ship. Padmé furrows her brow, contemplating. *Why would they just abandon the ship like that? Is something going on?*

“Look,” Leia says, pointing at the retreating troopers.

“Now’s our chance, go!” Han exclaims, his voice hushed. The five of them bolt out of the hallway, heading towards the ship as fast as their feet will carry them.

But then Luke stops, and turns to see why exactly the Stormtroopers left. “*Ben?*” he says. Han and Chewbacca are still running to the entrance of the Millennium Falcon, but Leia and Padmé stop with Luke.

Her heart freezes in her chest when she sees it. The Stormtroopers stopped guarding the ship because there is a spectacle unfolding in the hallway by the docking bay. In the mouth of a doorway, a dark figure that is all too familiar and an old man dressed in Jedi robes battle, each of them lunging at one another with lightsabers in their hands. Vader’s is Sith-red, a saber color Padmé has never actually seen in person before; Obi-Wan’s is blue, just as it had been in the era of the Old Republic.

No, she thinks. Padmé begins to tremble, but not out of fear for herself. She is afraid for both Obi-Wan and Vader, knowing that lightsaber duels seldom end in draws. One of them is going to die—unless she does something about it.

Luke moves forward, getting closer to the doorway where Obi-Wan and Darth Vader are dueling. Padmé follows, but Leia keeps her distance, her body growing rigid at the sight of the Dark Lord.

Obi-Wan glances at Luke, but then turns his head when he spots Padmé. Vader hesitates, seemingly unsure of why Obi-Wan’s focus would suddenly shift. Obi-Wan turns back to Vader, and Padmé can see his mouth moving, saying something to his opponent, though she cannot hear it.

Whatever it was, it seems to have struck a nerve in Vader, because he too looks at the docking bay. Although Padmé cannot see his eyes through his mask, she knows that he sees her; she can feel his gaze burning into her skin.

She wonders what he feels right now—anger? Despair? Betrayal?

Darth Vader barks an order to the Stormtroopers, and swings his saber at Obi-Wan, his movements swift and full of a furious aggression. Their blades clash again and again, Obi-Wan only blocking Vader's attacks now. He has moved into a defensive position, carefully guarding himself from Vader.

The Stormtroopers begin to fire, but not at Padmé. They only shoot at Luke, Han, Leia, and Chewbacca, who retaliate with blaster fire of their own.

Padmé shoots with the rest of them, and together they take down several Stormtroopers, but a few still remain. She knows that she'll have to do something to help Obi-Wan escape; she has a gut feeling that Vader isn't the one in danger here.

She looks down at the grenade tucked into a pocket in her belt. Padmé glances at the doorway, quickly devising a plan to create a distraction.

Her hand closes around the grenade in her belt pocket, and she pulls it out, pressing the button to detonate it.

"Obi-Wan!" she yells, and thrusts the grenade at the group of Stormtroopers. The grenade lands just close enough to the doorway not only hit the Stormtroopers, but to also blow Vader and Obi-Wan back. Perhaps with Padmé's warning, Obi-Wan and Vader would separate, allowing Obi-Wan to make an easier escape.

It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was all she could do at the moment.

Before the grenade goes off, to her relief, Obi-Wan and Vader break apart. The two men back away from each other, trying to avoid the blast from the grenade. Obi-Wan, just as she hoped, is closer to the exit now than Vader, who is now out of sight, concealed by the wall.

The explosion shakes the floor, but Padmé holds her ground. With a blast of flame and smoke, the Stormtroopers are mostly obliterated. Pieces of their armored bodies are flung in every direction; Padmé grimaces at the sight. She can't see if Vader was blown back, but through the veil of smoke, she can see that Obi-Wan falls to his knees. He quickly recovers, however, and races towards the Millennium Falcon faster than any old man she had ever seen.

"Holy—nice one, Padmé!" exclaims Leia, her eyes widening at the chaos Padmé was wrecked upon the docking bay.

"You've got some serious guts, sister," Han remarks. He doesn't stick around, though. Eager to board his ship, he and Chewbacca dart up the ramp to get it ready for takeoff.

"Ben, thank Force!" cries Luke, grinning with joy as Obi-Wan reaches him. "Let's go!" Luke grabs him by his robe and leads him onboard, but Padmé doesn't follow. She remains glued to the floor, her body stiff.

She is not in reality; she is stuck in her own mind, going back and forth between two choices. She can stay and try to lead her husband back to the light, or she can go with her children and continue to lead the rebels to victory. The Alliance would need her, now more than ever. Her children would need her, too... but so does Vader. If she left him, would he be lost in darkness forever?

Before she can make a decision on whether to stay or leave, Leia tugs at her arm. “Padmé, what are you waiting for? Come on!” She pulls her onto the ramp of the Millennium Falcon. Padmé glances back several times at the dark figure of Vader that can be seen through the smoke. His lightsaber is sheathed, and he seems to be moving towards the ship.

“*Padmé!*” Leia is shouting now. She hears her, but she’s too distracted, too torn between saving her husband and being with her children to make a clear decision. Han pokes his head out from the Falcon and raises an eyebrow when he sees that Padmé is being dragged by her daughter onto the ship.

“Oh, what the hell!” he says gruffly. “Come on, sister, we gotta go!” Han helps Leia by grabbing Padmé’s arm and yanking her into the ship.

chapter viii: the son.

Padmé has barely said a word since the Millennium Falcon escaped from the Death Star. Tie-fighters had chased them on their way out, but Luke and Han defended the ship. It would be smooth sailing from here, despite the fact that the Empire is tracking them. They would have to move quickly once they reach Yavin IV, as Padmé suspects that the Empire will launch a heavy attack on the rebel base.

She should be happy that she escaped with her children, but instead, Padmé sits on one of the sofas and mopes.

Padmé tells herself to keep her chin up—she has a responsibility to the Rebellion, and to her children. She should take this opportunity to get to know her son, and possibly unite them together as a family. Padmé isn't sure of how to go about that, but she yearns for Luke and Leia to know that she is their mother. She's missed out on nineteen years of their life, and now, it is time to make up for it.

Obi-Wan approaches her, coming out of the cockpit, where the others are. She looks up at him, her dark eyes filled with gloom.

The old Jedi master sighs. "He told you, didn't he?"

Obi-Wan does not need to clarify who 'he' is. Padmé nods at him in response and trains her eyes on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Padmé," Obi-Wan apologizes. He takes a seat beside her and places a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I thought it would be too painful to tell you the truth."

"So, it was better for me to find out this way?" she snaps, her emotions getting the best of her. There is a storm building inside of her—despair and anger dance and tangle together, creating a dark, impenetrable maelstrom of volatile feelings. "Do you have any idea what that was like for me?"

"If I told you the truth, it would have only put you in harm's way," Obi-Wan explains.

"Anakin wouldn't hurt me," she argues. *But he has before*, she reminds herself bitterly. Part of her does understand why Obi-Wan lied to her, but she is too stubborn to admit that to him. "Maybe you were just being selfish."

"What?" inquires Obi-Wan, furrowing his brow.

"He told me what you did to him," Padmé says, a dark expression falling over her face. "He said you *watched* as he burned alive on Mustafar." Vader is cruel, yes, but Padmé also believes that what Obi-Wan did to him was absolutely callous.

"It would not have been the Jedi way the kill him," replies Obi-Wan, his voice and facial features completely calm. "A Jedi does not kill a vulnerable enemy. I was simply allowing the Force to guide his fate."

Padmé shakes her head. "That doesn't change that it was cruel, Obi-Wan."

“Padmé...” Obi-Wan stands from his seat and saunters to the center of the room. ‘Your love and pity for the man he once was is getting the best of you,’ he warns. “He is not the man we knew anymore.”

She knows that Obi-Wan is right. She knows that Darth Vader, that Anakin, has committed some of the darkest deeds the galaxy has ever known. He has enslaved worlds to the Empire, exterminated possibly hundreds of Jedi, murdered children in cold blood, slaughtered rebel friends of Padmé’s like they were nothing. But in all of that darkness, she sees a point of light, like a star in the middle an endless expanse of space. It is hope—because if Anakin Skywalker was truly gone, Vader would have tortured her like she was any other rebel. He wouldn’t have spared Leia for her—he wouldn’t have *cared* at all.

“Anakin is still there, Obi-Wan,” she tells him. “You just don’t know him like I do.”

Obi-Wan places his hand on his forehead and shakes his head in disappointment. “Padmé, you don’t know what happened to Alderaan, do you?”

“No,” she replies. Worry seeps into her tone—what does Obi-Wan mean? She thinks back to that moment in the elevator, the pain in Leia’s eyes upon the mention of Alderaan.

“Alderaan was destroyed,” Obi-Wan says solemnly. “The Death Star possesses the power to destroy a planet... that was why we ended up on the battle station. We had been heading to Alderaan to deliver the plans to Bail Organa, but we were met with a meteor shower.”

Padmé just stares at him for a moment, frozen in shock, and then blinks. She doesn’t want to believe Obi-Wan, but she knows that he wouldn’t lie to her about something like this.

She does not know how to react. She was already in turmoil, and now she has been pushed off the edge. Padmé wants to cry, shout, bury her head in her hands, curl up into a ball, and go to sleep to give her mind a rest all at once. It’s too much to handle; she almost quite literally malfunctions and begins to stutter out fragments of a sentence.

“Bail... Alderaan... everything... all gone...”

Her eyes are filled with tears, and the moment Obi-Wan speaks, they fall. “I’m so sorry, Padmé. I wish I could have stopped it.”

She begins to blame herself; she knows now what Vader had been hiding from her when he took her out for a walk around the Death Star. The battle station had been heading somewhere, and Tarkin requested something of Vader. But he wouldn’t tell her what, and she accepted that. *Could I have done something? Could I have tried to reach out to Vader and gotten him to tell me what was going on?* If she had tried harder to find out where the Death Star was going, couldn’t she have persuaded Vader to spare the innocent planet?

And Leia—her daughter’s emotional state must be in shambles. The man who raised her is gone, along with her home and her people. Everything she has ever known has been swept away, stolen from her.

The man who raised her daughter is gone—*Bail* is gone.

Guilt swallows Padmé whole. In a way, she had betrayed Bail; she never truly loved him, not like she had loved Anakin. She sought out his companionship as a *replacement* for her husband.

Padmé doesn't know if she's mourning for Bail, for herself, or for Leia. She only knows what she feels—an all-consuming, cold feeling of despair.

Her daughter emerges from the cockpit of the Falcon and steps dead when she sees the scene unfolding before her. “Padmé?” she says, walking towards her mother, “What’s wrong?”

“Alderaan, I—I didn’t know,” Padmé chokes out.

Leia lowers her eyes to the floor for a moment, bowing her head. She then looks back up at Padmé, and takes a seat beside her. “What’s important now is that the technical readout of that battle station reaches Yavin IV. We’ll be able to find a weakness if we analyze it—not all is lost, Padmé. I have hope that even with the loss of Alderaan...” her voice cracks for a moment, but Leia is able to contain herself. She has had more time than Padmé to process the destruction of Alderaan. “Even with the loss of Alderaan, the Rebellion will prevail,” Leia finishes.

R2-D2, who sits in the corner of the room, beeps with enthusiasm.

Padmé nods, wiping away her tears. Her daughter’s comfort has calmed her down, but she still feels shattered by the news Obi-Wan gave her.

Leia wraps her arms around Padmé affectionately, and Padmé leans into her daughter’s embrace. “It’s going to be alright, Padmé,” she tells her soothingly. “We’ll get through this together.”

Together—Padmé smiles through her sadness. At least she is with her children, now. And soon, she decides, they will know that they are family, whether Obi-Wan wants them to know or not.

Han Solo appears in the doorway, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Luke has joined him; her son walks into the room and stands beside Obi-Wan, leaving Chewbacca to pilot the Millennium Falcon.

“Alright, sister,” says Han. “Before we reach Yavin IV, I want to know what was going on back in the Detention Center.”

She knows exactly what he is referring to, and she turns to the captain, nodding. “I will,” she tells him.

But Leia narrows her eyes at Han. “Padmé is on our side,” she insists. “So get that accusing tone out of your voice.”

“I wasn’t accusing anyone of anything, sweetheart,” Han raises his hands defensively. “I just want to make sure that I know who my passengers are.”

Padmé raises an eyebrow, slightly offended that Han would think that she is an Imperial. She can understand the confusion, though. “You don’t really think I’m an Imperial, do you? If I was, I wouldn’t have helped you escape.”

“I don’t think you’re an Imperial,” Luke pipes up. Padmé smiles at her son, her heart warmed by his trust in her.

She quickly thinks of a lie to feed to Han. Padmé highly doubts that anyone on this ship would take kindly to her admitting that she is Vader's wife, and she doesn't think her children are ready to hear that, not now.

"But, to ease your nerves, Solo, Vader assigned guards to me because he wanted me to work for him. It's true that I wasn't a prisoner; I was wanted as a colleague, instead," she explains. Obi-Wan raises an eyebrow at her, and she catches his skeptical gaze. He knows that she is lying, but he says nothing, allowing her to conceal whatever she wishes. "Darth Vader was once a Jedi Knight of the Republic. We were acquaintances. I was once a senator, you see, so we did cross paths a few times. Vader believed that he could use me to appeal to rebelling systems, with my skills in diplomacy. He thought I would be a familiar face for some, too, and that I would be well-received by many politicians." Her expression betrays nothing, and she watches Han's reaction carefully to ensure that he believes every word she speaks.

After a while, Han nods slowly. "Alright, sweetheart, I believe you. After all, you did save our skins—got to give you that one."

Padmé grimaces at his nickname, the same one he gives to Leia—sweetheart. She knows it means nothing, but the expression on her face remains. Han laughs when he sees her reaction, and walks back into the cockpit.

When Han leaves, Leia says, "You actually knew Darth Vader? You never told me that."

Leia is right—the only thing Padmé ever told her daughter about Darth Vader is that he murdered her husband.

"There was never an appropriate time to bring it up," Padmé defends herself. "And it's not like we were friends, anyway."

They were far more than friends, but Leia doesn't need to know that yet. Someday, though, Padmé knows she will have to tell her the truth. But if she dropped that bomb on her now, Leia may be distracted, and her daughter must be focused for the battle ahead. Leia must already be a wreck over Alderaan; she didn't need the extra burden of knowing that a man she despises is her father.

"I suppose that is true," Leia agrees with a nod.

"You knew real Jedi Knights?" Luke suddenly interjects. His voice is full of a childish enthusiasm, and Padmé smiles; he reminds her so much of Anakin when he was younger. "Were you ever involved in any battles? I know you were a senator, but..."

Padmé lets out a small laugh. "I was a senator, but that doesn't mean I was shy when it came to action," she says.

"Oh, yes, Padmé was quite the fighter back in the day," Obi-Wan adds.

"I was involved in a few battles in the Clone Wars—Obi-Wan and I actually fought alongside one another a few times," Padmé continues. Her gloomy mood is brightened by those old memories; for once, her nostalgia about the past doesn't bring her down.

"Wow! That's so cool!" exclaims Luke. His whole face has lit up with excitement, like a young child receiving a new toy. "Obi-Wan told me my father fought in the Clone Wars, too

—Anakin Skywalker. Did you know him?”

A pang pierces her heart at the mention of Anakin’s name. Despite how much hearing Luke talk about his father hurts, Padmé keeps herself composed.

But then she realizes something—*Leia*. Her daughter knows that she was married to a man named Anakin Skywalker, and now that Luke has revealed that Anakin was his father... Leia is bright enough to connect the dots. Padmé glances at her daughter, who is giving her quite a look. She doesn’t seem angry, but her eyes are wide with shock as her eyes dart between Padmé and Luke. Disbelief and confusion is written all over her face, but she remains silent. But her eyes say, *You better explain later*.

“Yes, I did,” she replies, forcing a small smile. “He was an amazing Jedi, and he was very compassionate—like you.” Her voice sounds too wistful when she speaks of Anakin, and Luke seems to catch on, because he looks at her with a little too much curiosity in his eyes.

“Were you friends?” he presses further.

“Uh—” Padmé hesitates. Leia casts her a glance, as does Obi-Wan. “Yes, we were friends.”

“Anyway, Luke,” Obi-Wan says, diverting the attention away from Padmé. She silently thanks him with a quick glance. “Would you like to train more with the seeker?”

A seeker—Padmé has heard of those before. They are small, levitating robotic balls that are able to blast lasers at its target, and are typically used for combat training.

Luke smiles at Obi-Wan. “Sure,” he replies, and stands up. He and Obi-Wan head off to a separate room, leaving Padmé and Leia alone.

Her daughter narrows her eyes at Padmé. “Is... is he...?”

“My son?” Padmé finishes Leia’s sentence for her. Leia nods—that had indeed been what she was going to say.

Padmé sighs in defeat, knowing that if she lied, it would only result in Leia’s distrust. “Yes,” she tells her. “I—I wasn’t sure how to bring it up, but now you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asks Leia. To Padmé’s relief, her tone is not harsh or caustic, only inquisitive.

“When Luke was born, Obi-Wan and I decided that it was best to separate us from each other. You see... Luke is Force-sensitive, and the son of a very powerful Jedi,” Padmé explains. She does her best to remain as vague as possible, for she is still unsure of how she is going to break the news to Leia that she and Luke are siblings. “You know that Darth Vader killed Anakin,” she says. This, of course, she now knew to be a lie, but Leia didn’t know that. She isn’t ready for that knowledge, so Padmé withholds it for the time being.

“Yes, I remember,” Leia says with a nod. She watches Padmé carefully, not out of distrust, but out of concern.

“If Vader knew that Anakin’s son lived, he would hunt him down and kill him,” Padmé continues, wording everything she says with great caution. “Vader knows that Anakin and I had a relationship—he and Anakin were very close. He believes that the child was a stillborn,

but if he knew I had a nineteen-year-old living son, it would be easy for him to connect the dots.”

“I can see why you would want to keep it a secret, then,” replies Leia. Her voice is understanding, and Padmé is glad for her compassion. “Did my father know?”

Your father? Padmé thinks. I just said that Vader doesn't know—oh. She stops herself. She means Bail, of course. Of course, she means Bail, what was I thinking?

“Yes, Bail was there when Obi-Wan and I decided to send Luke to Tatooine,” Padmé answers. Saying his name sends a little jolt of sorrow into her heart, and guilt riots up within her again. *You never loved him*, an accusing voice in her head, some dark part of her conscience, tells her. *And you won't truly miss him, either.*

Padmé fights back, insisting to herself that she would miss Bail. And she does truly believe that she will—she will miss his smile, his friendship, his embraces, his jokes. But although she will not admit it quite yet, she will not miss his kisses. She will not long for him to touch her, will not yearn for his presence with every piece of her heart.

No, such feelings were reserved for only one person.

“And, Leia...” Padmé says. “When we reach Yavin IV, if you have time before the battle, there's something I'd like to discuss with you.”

Because in case she or her daughter dies, Leia must know the truth: that Padmé is her mother. She is fully aware that not all of them may survive the encroaching battle against the Empire—it was the best time, she believes, to tell Luke and Leia that they are family.

With Luke, Padmé believes it will be rather simple. If she could convince Obi-Wan to back her up, Luke would surely believe her. But Leia may need an extra push, some solid evidence. Padmé gets the feeling that Leia is not one to take a leap of faith, and so Padmé will not make her.

She eyes R2-D2, who still sits in the corner of the room. In his computer, he is storing a hologram of Bail, explaining Leia's true lineage to her. There had been a copy saved on Alderaan, too, for when the time was right, but that was gone, now.

The holorecording does not include that Vader is Leia's father, but rather Anakin. After all, Bail was unaware that Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker were the same person. Just like Padmé, he believed Anakin Skywalker to be long dead, murdered by Darth Vader nineteen years ago, and that was exactly how he told the tale in the recording.

“You could tell me now,” Leia tries to pry. “We're alone right now.”

Padmé shakes her head. “Han or Chewbacca could walk out of that cockpit at any moment, Leia. It's better if we wait for Yavin IV.”

“Is it... something bad?”

“No. To me, it's good news,” Padmé says with a small smile.

Leia nods. “Okay, when we reach Yavin IV, then,” she agrees.

Darth Vader is not a forgiving man.

And yet, he finds it difficult to direct his anger at Padmé. Rather, he places the blame on Obi-Wan for his pain. He knows that there is a possibility Padmé had not been running from him, but rather running *to* something: her beloved Rebellion. She likely feels a responsibility to the Alliance, and to the princess, but he doesn't know how he fits into the equation. Padmé doesn't hate him, he knows that—he would have felt it if she did. But that doesn't mean she wants to be with him.

Nineteen years have gone by, and Obi-Wan is *still* in his way, still poisoning his wife's mind. He would have to deal with his old master eventually.

He should have been more careful; of course Padmé is clever enough to get past assassin class guards. Part of him is impressed that Padmé was able to overcome such specialize warriors, but another part of him is enraged at the guards' stupidity. He would have killed them if Padmé had not already done that.

After he watched the Millennium Falcon disappear into space and felt Padmé's presence fade away, he was thrown into a bout of despair, and then into a fit of rage. An officer with too much curiosity had approached him and asked if the princess had escaped on the freighter, and Vader ignited with anger. He has already forgotten exactly how many Stormtroopers he killed and how many droids he destroyed back in that hangar.

The officer hadn't intended any harm. He, and everyone else Vader killed, were just collateral damage.

Darth Vader now stands in the conference room with Grand Moff Tarkin, his arms folded over his chest, still frustrated over losing the plans, the princess, and Padmé all in one go.

"I have set our course for Yavin IV," Tarkin informs him. "Soon, the Death Star will be ready to blow the planet to smithereens."

Vader almost shudders. He finds himself horrified by the thought, but only because he knows that Padmé would be on that planet. It wouldn't just be the rebels being exploded into mere particles—it would be *Padmé*. He believed her to be dead for nineteen years, and he knows that he can't go through losing her again. Being apart from her is more bearable than her being dead; even if they never saw each other again, at least she would be alive.

"No," Vader tells Tarkin. "We have already made an example of one planet, and they will be expecting an attack by the Death Star. To make matters more severe, they have likely found a weakness in the battle station from the plans. If we launch a surprise surface attack, we can take out their weapons and split their attention between attacking the Death Star and defending Yavin IV." It isn't an illogical idea, but even Vader knows that a surface attack is completely unnecessary—that is, if Padmé was not going to be one of the rebels being blown up. Even if he was able to contact her and warn her to leave Yavin IV, he highly doubts she would heed his words.

Tarkin huffs in irritation. "There is most likely not much of a weakness at all, Vader."

"You are naïve to think so," Vader tells him. He knows that Tarkin's plan could work, but Tarkin's plan also involves Padmé's death—something Vader that will only happen over his

dead body. “The lead scientist for the Death Star was a traitor. He is part of the reason the rebels have the plans in the first place.”

“Galen Erso is no longer relevant,” argues Tarkin. “It is quicker and more efficient to simply attack Yavin IV with the Death Star only.”

“It seems a compromise is needed,” Vader says. Tarkin won’t give in, and neither will he; Tarkin is dead-set on demonstrating the power of the Death Star once more, and Vader is dead-set on saving Padmé. “I will lead a surface attack, and once all Imperial troops are evacuated, you may demonstrate the Death Star’s power once again.”

“You seem very adamant about this, Vader.” Tarkin’s expression is skeptical, yet he sighs in reluctant defeat. “I suppose we won’t come to a different agreement. Very well, Vader, you may have your surface attack, and I will have my demonstration.” His eyes are narrowed, but Vader pays no mind to Tarkin’s apparent irritation towards him. Right now, he is more focused on saving his wife from certain death. He would have to act quickly once he arrives on Yavin IV and find her before Imperial forces would be ordered to retreat.

“It is simply better strategy, Tarkin. You will see that after we’ve won.”

chapter ix: bloodlines.

The *Millennium Falcon* arrives on Yavin IV, and the group of rebels are met with a fully prepared and determined Alliance. The base is located inside of the Great Temple, a former Massassi building originally constructed five thousand years ago. Rebels bustle about, readying the X-wings for the attack on the Death Star.

Han Solo has already decided to leave the Alliance, since he has now collected his reward for rescuing Leia and Padmé. But that was to be expected—though Han would be a useful pilot, he has unfinished business to attend to. Luke seemed rather perplexed by Han’s announcement to leave, but Padmé was more neutral on the matter.

Like Captain Solo, Padmé has unfinished business, too, which she must take care of before the battle begins. Padmé knows she doesn’t have much time to talk to her children, but she also doesn’t want to wait any longer. If one of them died before knowing the truth, it would weigh down on her forever. Luke is the one who is in the most danger here, since he has volunteered to pilot one of the X-wings that will be attempting to take down the Death Star.

But when the Death Star is destroyed, will her husband be destroyed along with it? She hopes not, but she has accepted that it is a possibility. If she had stayed, she might be in danger, too. Padmé can’t stop the most important attack on the Empire to save one man. She does not have the authority to do so, either; Padmé is a member of a council of several other rebel leaders, who would never agree to stop the attack. It would be illogical, for the Empire would just crush them anyway.

Obi-Wan seems to catch the grim look on Padmé’s face. She hadn’t realized that she had been frowning. “He will probably survive the attack, Padmé,” he reassures her in a low voice so that they are not overheard by the rebels around them. They are still standing in the hangar, which is full of rebel maintenance crews and pilots. “The Empire will have to destroy the X-wings ship to ship, since they are so small. I’m sure he will be one of the pilots going after them.”

She nods. Obi-Wan is very knowledgeable, more so than she is, about space combat.

“You don’t want him to live, though,” she says quietly but bitterly. She knows it’s true; Obi-Wan wouldn’t shed a single tear over Vader dying.

He doesn’t verbally agree or disagree with her, but he doesn’t need to for her to know his stance on the matter. “I’m simply stating that he always makes it, despite how perilous the circumstances are—he is very resourceful.” It is Obi-Wan’s version of being supportive,

It is somewhat comforting that Obi-Wan is most likely correct. Surely, Vader would be smart enough to not be aboard the Death Star. He is a Sith; hopefully, his sense of self-preservation would motivate him to be elsewhere while the attack on the Death Star is taking place.

“Anyway,” she says, shaking her head. “After Leia is finished briefing the pilots, I was wondering if you would help me talk to Luke and Leia. I want them to know the truth.”

Obi-Wan looks at her, his features contorted with worry. “The whole truth?” He knits his eyebrows together. “Padmé, I don’t think...”

“No. Just the part about me—I know they’re not ready to hear about the rest,” she tells him. It isn’t necessary for her to say Darth Vader’s name; Obi-Wan knows exactly what she means by ‘the rest.’

The Jedi master places a hand on his chin in contemplation. After a few moments, he says, “Alright, if that is what you think is best. I support your judgement.”

She smiles at Obi-Wan as a thank you. “Years ago, Bail recorded a message for Leia, explaining almost everything. Artoo should still be storing it—I’ll go retrieve Artoo, and you can find Leia and Luke. They should be finishing up with the briefing in a few minutes. Meet me on the roof of the temple. It’s one of the few places where we won’t be disturbed.” The rebel base is lacking in private areas, but the temple roof should do just fine for a meeting place.

“I’ll meet you there soon,” Obi-Wan says with a nod. And with that, they part ways.

Padmé exits the elevator to the roof of the Great Temple. She stands on the third tier of the roof, just one level above the ship hangars. From here, she can see the endless green horizon of Yavin IV and the tops of the other abandoned Massassi temples that now harbors rebel forces. The pale, cloudless sky stretches over her head; not long from now, she’ll be looking up at it again, watching her son’s X-wing fly into space.

Artoo is standing beside her, and he beeps in excitement as footsteps approach from behind them. They both turn to see Luke, Leia, and Obi-Wan. Luke is now dressed in his orange pilot uniform, but Leia and Obi-Wan haven’t changed clothing. The corners of her mouth turn up in a slight smile as her son walks toward her—a brave pilot, just like his father.

“What did you want to talk about?” Luke asks her. “Obi-Wan says it’s important.”

“Yes, it is,” replies Padmé. She looks down at the ground nervously, her stomach churning. *What if they don’t accept me?* she worries. The thought of her children rejecting her is almost unfathomable... but it is also very possible. Luke may resent her for leaving him on Tatooine—even though she had no say in the matter, and it wasn’t her idea—and Leia might lose trust in her. If it had been up to Padmé, she would have stayed with them both and raised them on a secluded planet that wasn’t directly in the eyes of the Empire, perhaps even Naboo. But she was frozen in carbonite by the time it was decided where Luke and Leia would be sent, and Obi-Wan urged her not to disturb their already established lives.

“It’ll have to be quick, but both of you need to know... in case something happens during this battle,” Padmé says. Her eyes find Leia’s, but she immediately regrets looking at her. A wave of anxiety riots within her, threatening to break her composure. She fights against it, not wanting her fear to shake her too much.

Luke nods at her, a signal to continue. Leia, however, furrows her brow with worry and takes a step forward. “Padmé, what’s wrong?”

Padmé draws in a deep breath and closes her eyes. When they open again, she is looking at her daughter. “Leia,” she begins. “Do you remember your mother? Your real mother?”

Leia has known her whole life that she was adopted, so that question hardly catches her off guard. She blinks, clearly not expecting Padmé’s question, but soon replies with, “Just a little bit. She died when I was very young.” Padmé catches wistfulness in her daughter’s voice, and it gives her hope, hope that Leia would be quick to accept her as her mother.

“What do you remember?” Padmé prompts her.

“Just images, really, feelings.” Of course, Leia wouldn’t have solid memories of her as her mother. But perhaps it is possible that she remembers her through the Force.

Padmé nods. “Tell me,” she presses on.

She watches Leia carefully, waiting for her to continue. Her pounding heart feels as if it has migrated to her throat, and her breathing has become uneven. Judging by Obi-Wan’s concerned gaze, he seems to have noticed, and he gives her an encouraging smile.

“She was... very beautiful,” Leia says. She looks down at the ground, focusing intently on something deep in her mind. The ghost of a smile graces her lips, faint, but undoubtedly present. “Kind... but, sad.”

Those words make Padmé’s heart sink. *Kind but sad.* She knows it’s true, and it pains her to realize that Leia, even as a child, could feel her mother’s despair at Anakin’s fall to the Dark Side.

Leia looks at her curiously, but Padmé directs her attention to Luke. “And Luke? Do you know anything of your mother?”

Luke stares at her for a moment, seemingly unsure of what to say. A somber expression passes over his face and his eyes fill with an empty loneliness that makes Padmé’s heart twist up inside her chest. He looks like a lost child, an orphan forever left wondering about his true parentage.

“I have no memory of my mother,” he says quietly. “I never knew her.”

“You do now,” Padmé tells him, and a weight lifts off her shoulders. Leia isn’t surprised at all, but Luke clearly is, for his eyes widen and freezes in shock. She wonders what he feels right now—she hopes that he feels as relieved as she does.

Luke pauses, standing motionless and speechless for a moment. When he finally speaks up, he says, “What?”

“I was married to Anakin Skywalker,” she explains. “When you asked if we knew each other... I wasn’t sure what to say. But I do now. I know you hardly know me, but I thought nineteen years not knowing the truth is long enough.”

“But Owen and Beru told me you were dead,” Luke shakes his head. She isn’t sure if that’s just from shock or from disbelief. “They said you died in childbirth.”

“I should have,” she replies. Her mind momentarily takes her back to that day, nineteen years ago, lying on a hospital bed, feeling the life drain out of her body and not being able to

do anything about it. “But Obi-Wan and Bail Organa froze me in a carbonite chamber so that my body could heal, and then they awakened me twelve years later.”

Her son turns to Obi-Wan, astounded by Padmé’s words. “Is this true, Obi-Wan?” Luke asks the Jedi master.

Obi-Wan looks at him and nods. “Yes. Padmé and Anakin are your birth parents,” he confirms.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he goes on. Padmé can’t see his expression now since he is turned to face Obi-Wan, she can assume by his tone that confusion is written all over his features.

Obi-Wan sighs and looks at Padmé, then shifts his gaze back to Luke. “I knew it would only be a matter of time before you and Padmé finally crossed paths. I wanted her to be the one to tell you.”

Leia’s eyes dart quizzically between Padmé and Luke. She catches suspicion on her daughter’s face—Leia is onto something, but Padmé isn’t sure what.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” Leia interjects. Luke turns back to face her, and everyone goes silent. She blinks slowly and then folds her arms over her chest. “Somehow, I’m involved in this.”

Padmé nods. “Yes,” she replies. “And what is why I brought Artoo.” She beckons the droid to come forward with a wave of her hand, and he obliges.

“I thought this knowledge would be best received... if you were to hear it from your father,” she tells Leia. It would be heartwrenching for Leia to see Bail’s image preserved in a hologram, but Padmé believes that it is for the best. She doesn’t think that the hologram will upset Leia; it may sadden her, but her daughter would be immersed in nostalgia—*happy* memories of her and her adoptive father.

Leia is looking at her with hopeful yet sorrowful eyes, but her attention snaps to R2-D2 when Padmé says, “Artoo, if you would play Bail’s message, please.”

The droid emits a few beeping noises, and then projects a blue light onto the ground. Bail Organa materializes into the air, dressed in a formal gray suit with a long cape, his typical attire for an official Alliance meeting. The late rebel leader smiles, and Leia draws in a sharp breath, almost like a gasp.

“Leia,” Bail Organa says with an affectionate tone. Padmé sighs softly, doleful at hearing the sound of his voice again—a voice that after this message ends, she will *never* hear again.

“If you are watching this message now, it means that I was not able to tell you this in person, and for that I am sorry. Know that, even if I am gone, my love is always with you,” continues Bail. His features are soft with compassion for his adopted daughter as he speaks; Padmé feels guilt close around her again, still partly blaming herself for the destruction of Alderaan and for not loving Bail the way she should have.

“The reason I’m making this message is because there is something I have kept from you: the identity of your birth parents,” says the holographic Bail. It is so strange to see his image again, lively as ever. Padmé feels as if she is looking at a ghost rather than a holoprojection.

She glances at her daughter, whose eyes are beginning to water, but Leia doesn't let the tears fall.

"The woman you now know as a caregiver, Padmé Amidala, is your biological mother, and your father was Anakin Skywalker, the famous Jedi hero. And there is more—you have a twin brother as well, Luke Skywalker, a moisture farmer on Tatooine. Bheha and I hid this from you with intentions to protect you. We never meant to betray you; everything we have done has been for your safety." Bail Organa still speaks with a gentle tone, but Padmé can hear the worry in his voice. He must have felt anxious that Leia might become angry at what he has told her, but from what Padmé can see on her face, that is not the reaction Leia is having.

"You know that Anakin Skywalker was murdered by Darth Vader. If Vader knew of your true identity, or Luke's, he would see you as a threat. He would never allow the children of his rival to live," explains Bail. "That is why we could not tell you until you were ready. And if you're listening now, then that means it's the right time."

"Dad..." Leia whispers in longing. She begins to reach a hand out, as if she wants to touch the hologram of her adopted father, but then she withdraws.

"Because you are the daughter of a Jedi Knight, it is important that you receive training in the Force. I urge you to seek out Obi-Wan Kenobi, who has been living in exile on Tatooine and watching over your twin brother," the holographic image of Bail goes on. Leia glances at Obi-Wan, who gives her a slight nod. 'You and Luke are the last hopes for the galaxy. I trust that someday, the two of you will take down the Empire together.' Bail gives Leia a painful smile, and Padmé almost winces, knowing what he is about to say next. "Goodbye, Leia. I love you, always."

The message ends and Bail disappears, gone once again. Leia takes a deep breath and is silent for several seconds, but Padmé doesn't rush her. She allows the truth to sink in; Leia just needs time to process everything.

She looks at Padmé and walks toward her. Leia's arms open, pulling her mother into a warm embrace. "I always knew we had a deep connection. It makes sense now—why I've always felt a bond with you, even when we just met."

Leia pulls away, a smile on her face that warms Padmé's heart. Acceptance is all Padmé has ever wanted from Leia,

"And Luke," Padmé says, approaching her son. She takes his hands in hers, and to her delight, Luke returns her grip with his own. "I'm sorry you were left alone on Tatooine. If I could have had it my way, we would have been together from the beginning—all of us."

"I don't regret my childhood," her son tells her, his words soft with compassion. She knows that he won't love her instantly, that bonds like that will take time, but at least he doesn't reject her. "I understand why we had to be separated. It's not your fault."

"I... hate to interrupt, but," Obi-Wan breaks into the conversation. "I believe we do have a Death Star to destroy. Everyone should be getting to their stations, soon."

Padmé nods, knowing that Obi-Wan is right. She would have liked to talk more with her children, she supposes it can wait until after the battle, assuming everything goes according to

plan.

"I suppose we should get to our posts," she agrees, releasing her hands from Luke's. Her son meets her eyes for a moment, but then he looks away. There is a worried expression on his face, but that is to be expected—he is about to enter a dangerous space battle, after all.

"Will you be helping Leia monitor the battle?" Luke asks as the four of them, plus R2-D2, head towards the elevator.

"Yes, I'll be a part of command," Padmé replies. They step into the elevator, and her eyes flicker from Luke to Leia. "Good luck, both of you. We're going to need it." She gives a weak smile, but it is more to reassure herself than them. Padmé has a feeling that her children are more confident about the upcoming battle than she is, but she's sure it is just a mother's worries that are getting to her.

"Thank you," Luke replies. Leia says nothing, but nods at her mother in response. She still seems to be in shock, because her eyes are blank, and she keeps staring at the wall as the elevator descends.

She finds that she is much calmer now that her children know the truth. Padmé is standing in the command center of the Great Temple, monitoring the X-wings' positions with Leia. Obi-Wan is standing in the room, but he is there for moral support more than anything. He told her that he would be reaching out to Luke during the battle to guide him, so he has been watching the space battle as closely as Padmé and Leia are.

The blue dots on the screen represent the X-wings, while the red are the enemy ships. Both colors have intersected now—they have engaged in battle already, and the fight seems to be going in the Alliance's favor so far.

"The Death Star is much farther away than I expected," Obi-Wan says, placing a hand on his chin.

Before Obi-Wan can say anything more, an alarm beeps from one of the computers.

"General Organa, General Amidala!" exclaims a rebel watcher monitoring the planet scopes. "There appears to be a fleet of ships coming into the atmosphere on the other side of the Death Star!"

Padmé's heart jumps in her chest, and she whirls around. "What? Why wasn't this detected before?"

"They must have arrived from an area where our scopes don't reach," says the watcher. "And... we had been more closely monitoring the front, where the space battle is. If any ships were to come into the atmosphere, it would have been from there."

"It seems the Empire has predicted that we would assume that," Padmé sighs in frustration. She's sure that it must be Vader leading the attack; from what she knows about him now, he is the one who usually leads large military assaults. Has he come for her? Is she the reason the Empire is launching two attacks on the Alliance at once?

Padmé feels rather self-centered for presuming that, but she also knows that she's probably right. Even Obi-Wan shoots her a look; he seems to be thinking the same thing as her. She wouldn't put it past Vader to come collect her before the Death Star destroyed Yavin IV like it did Alderaan.

"Get the shields up," orders Leia sternly. "And sound the alarms. Have transports ready for retreat—but we've got to hold them off until the Death Star is destroyed. We'll never have a chance to attack it like this again."

As dangerous as it is to stay and fight the Empire on Yavin IV while simultaneously commanding and monitoring a space battle, Padmé knows that Leia is right. They must take this chance, or the galaxy may be lost to darkness forever.

"Contact the surrounding compounds as well and tell them to prepare for battle," Padmé says. "We weren't expecting a ground attack, so they'll have a leg up on us, but we should have enough troops to defend the base, for now."

"Yes, Generals," says the watcher, who then enters commands into their computer. Alarms blare from over their heads, and red lights begin to flash down the hallways that connect to the command center.

Padmé looks at Leia, and then at Obi-Wan. She already knows what she's going to do, and she also knows that they are both going to disapprove of her decision. "I'm going to lead the troops against the Empire," she announces. If any other general lead the attack, it would be more dangerous; while Padmé knows she's putting herself at risk, she also believes that she is less likely to die than the others. Vader, as cruel as he can be, wouldn't let her die. But if he saw Leia, Obi-Wan Rieekan, Syndulla, Dodonna—or really anyone else leading the battle—it would almost certainly be a death sentence.

Normally, she wouldn't rely on Vader's compassion, but she is willing to wager that she is the only person in the galaxy that he cares for.

"Are you sure that is wise, Padmé?" Obi-Wan questions her, his voice full of concern.

"I'll be alright, Obi-Wan," she tries to assure him. "You need to stay here so you can guide Luke if something happens—not to mention that it would be quite the blow if we lost our only Jedi."

"I'm not going to lie," Leia turns to her mother, a steely, serious expression on her face. "I think it's very dangerous, and I'm not for it. But I also know what I probably can't change your mind... and, well, you've proven yourself before as a very capable general."

Padmé stifles a laugh—her daughter *knows* she's too stubborn to back down from her decision. Leia did inherit some of her attitude from Padmé, after all.

chapter x: the battle of yavin.

Darth Vader's Imperial troops are upon them, and the rebels have been defending themselves valiantly.

Neither the Empire or the Alliance currently has the upper-hand. While the rebels are outnumbered, they have the advantage of knowing the territory and being able to hide more effectively in the forest due to their camouflage uniforms. (Save for Padmé, the only one not dressed in camouflage; she didn't have time to change, so she remained in her white bodysuit.)

She is able to contact the command center with her earpiece—she has a commlink on a silver bracelet around her wrist, too, but this way, Leia can send her updates while she is on the move. So far, things seem to be going well enough for the rebel pilots, though the space battle has hit quite a few rough patches. But most importantly, despite suffering some heavy losses, Luke is still alive.

Padmé's long cape billows in a brisk gust of wind as she advances through the moon's dense jungle with a group of Alliance soldiers. It has been a while since they encountered any Imperial troops, but the ones they have met with were taken care of without losing any soldiers.

But after a few more minutes of walking, Padmé and her squadron reach a clearing. She draws her blaster from her belt as she hears a twig snap from somewhere in the shadows of the underbrush.

"Stay alert," she commands her soldiers, keeping her voice hushed. They all draw their weapons and move into a defensive position, looking in all directions for a possible threat.

A figure emerges from the forest on the other side of the clearing, and Padmé and her troop turn, their stances aggressive. But they lower their blasters when they see that it is only another group of rebels.

"We thought you were Imperials," Padmé says in relief. "It looks like it's just us, then."

"Not *quite*," a voice interjects. Padmé freezes, her body immersed in ice. As everything in her body turns cold, her heart sinks like a stone in her chest. She knows that voice, that familiar, distorted, harsh voice. A chill runs down her spine, but it is not out of fear for herself.

She sees his shadow before she sees him, elongated in its projection onto the dirt ground, but unmistakably Vader's. He appears not even a moment after from the left side of the jungle, followed by his own squadron—which Padmé immediately notices is double the size of her own, including the other group of rebels they had just run into.

When Vader's Stormtroopers do not open fire, the rebels hesitate, looking to Padmé for orders. But unlike the others, Padmé isn't confused; she knows exactly what's going on. She

suspects he hasn't ordered his troops to fire because of her, because she could be injured, or even killed, in the crossfire.

"General Amidala," says a woman in Padmé's squadron—Sergeant Mallorus. "What are your orders?" Mallorus has her gun raised defensively, and she twitches with anxiety. Padmé can't exactly blame her; if she were her soldiers, completely oblivious to the truth, she would feel the same way.

"*General*, is it?" drawls Vader, especially extending the word 'general.' He takes a step forward, and in response, the rebels draw back, all except for Padmé. Though adrenaline is quickening her heartbeat, she is not afraid.

She knows that Vader is only trying to goad her. He draws out that word because to him, it must signify a betrayal. To be a rebel is one thing, but to be a general on the Alliance Council is a whole other level.

Padmé maintains her composure, an expression of steel, betraying nothing. If she shows even a hint of her true relation to Darth Vader, her soldiers would know that is something off.

"Yes," she answers Vader simply, careful to keep a neutral tone with him.

"Then, *General* Amidala, I will give you and your soldiers the option to surrender," he says. It was to be expected—Vader wants her, of course. It *has* to be what he came here for.

She stares at her husband with inquisitive eyes, wishing that she can see his expression right now. Is he angry? Hurt? Indifferent? Does he see her as a traitor like he did on Mustafar?

When Padmé remains silent, turning over her options in her head, Sergeant Mallorus leans in and whispers, "I'm sure it's a trick, General."

Padmé meets the Mallorus's eyes and gives a slight nod. Although she knows it isn't a trick, if she can keep Vader preoccupied, he would leave the other rebel troops alone. Padmé knows just as any other member of the Rebel Alliance that Vader can take down *any* of amount of rebel soldiers; keeping him distracted would significantly lower their body count.

"Retreat!" she orders. Padmé and her troops turn and bolt into the forest, but Vader and his men follow suit.

"After them!" Padmé hears him say.

She is at the head of the group, leading them to a communication center not far from where they are now. They wouldn't be able to lose them, but they could delay Vader and his troops for enough time. And then after that... she supposes she'll have to accept his terms of surrender—that, or miraculously figure out an escape plan.

Sweat begins to bead around her blaster from her hand as she races through the forest, leaping over rocks and dodging tree branches. Blood roars in her ears as her heart pounds in frenzied manner, and she can almost feel the burn of adrenaline rushing through her veins.

From somewhere far behind her, Padmé can hear Vader growl an order. Immediately after, shots fire through the air and shouts of pain and battlecries ring out through the forest. She whips her head around for a moment, still running at full speed, to see both Stormtroopers and rebels falling dead onto the ground.

“Padmé, what’s going on?” Leia asks from her earpiece. She must have opened the communication line and heard Padmé and her soldier’s conversation.

“It’s Vader,” she gets out between heavy breaths. “He found us. We’re retreating to a communication compound now to hold them off, but I don’t know for how long.”

“Just hold tight. After the battle is over and we start evacuating, I’ll come get you and any soldiers that are left. Which communication center is it?”

“It’s the one in sector three,” replies Padmé.

“Try to reach the top of the tower, eventually,” Leia says. “And I’ll bring Obi-Wan in case Vader needs to be handled.”

“You don’t have to—” Padmé tries to suggest that she would fine, even if Leia didn’t come rescue her.

“Yes, I do,” Leia cuts in. “This isn’t up for debate.”

Padmé draws in a deep, desperate breath, trying to fill her lungs with as much air as possible. Her airways sting from all the running, but she can’t afford to stop now.

“Okay, Leia,” sighs Padmé. She doesn’t have much time to argue, anyway.

“I’ll see you soon,” her daughter tells her. She hears Leia’s end go silent; she seems to have closed off the communication line.

Through the trees, Padmé can now see the outline of the communication center. It is a rectangular building, with a tall tower extending out from its roof. Once they emerge into the clearing where the communication center is, Padmé briefly looks up at the tower as she and realizes that there’s no way all her soldiers would fit on the top. She would have to find another way to save them.

“Come on!” she urges her troops forward. She has almost reached the door now, and she is nearly shaking with anticipation to get it open so she can buy more time.

In the not so far distance, Padmé can hear Vader bark an order. “Take out as many as possible, but *do not* to hit the general! Keep your attacks to the back of the group!”

The sound of blaster fire rips into the air, and Padmé frantically presses her palm against the touch ID pad. As it processes her prints, all she can think is, *Come on, come on, come on!* Padmé grits her teeth in frustration, but it quickly dissipates when she hears the computer say, “Authorized.”

The doors slide open, and Padmé ushers her soldiers inside.

“Go, go, go!” she shouts. Several rebels run inside the compound to safety, and while that should reassure Padmé, her heart is still hammering in her chest, her body and mind overloaded with sheer terror for her comrades. Vader clearly has no issue removing the obstacles in his way—to him, they are nothing but disposable rebels.

With most of her soldiers inside the compound, Padmé hesitates, and looks behind her, but she immediately wishes that she hadn’t. When Padmé turns around, she sees the menacing red glow of Vader’s lightsaber. She gasps as he cuts right through a few rebel soldiers in only a

matter of seconds. He fights so ruthlessly, so mercilessly, and it shakes Padmé to her core. She is absolutely horrified by the atrocities Vader is so willing to commit, and all in the name of so-called peace.

A rebel man—one of the last few soldiers who stayed behind to fight—kicks Vader in the gut, but the dark lord only staggers back. When he moves forward again, he swiftly beheads the rebel, and Padmé swallows a scream. As the man’s head rolls onto the ground and his decapitated body crumples, she darts inside, unable to bear it anymore.

I should have just accepted surrender, she reprimands herself. But it is too late for that, now. She would have to carry out her plan until the end.

Once inside, Padmé punches a button on the control panel, and the door closes, locking them inside. For extra security, she puts up a second door, the blast door. *That should hold them for a while—I hope.*

The image of Vader—her *husband*—slicing off the head of one of her soldiers has burned itself into her mind. Padmé’s stomach churns and a sickly feeling of guilt has come over her entire body.

“How many did we lose?” she asks the rebel fighters.

“About ten soldiers,” Sergeant Mallorus answers her. “Or maybe more. Fifteen, at most.”

Padmé shakes her head—it still leaves about twenty soldiers alive, that was still ten to fifteen deaths that she now feels responsible for.

When her face falls, Sergeant Mallorus says, “It’s not your fault that we lost some of our soldiers, General Amidala. Surrendering to the Empire would have been a death sentence.”

But this time, maybe it wouldn’t have been, she almost says, but she holds her tongue.

“I... I’m going to have to try to renegotiate,” she says, shaking her head. “We’re safe now, but not for long. Vader is going to cut through those doors soon enough.”

“But, General—”

“Sergeant Mallorus,” Padmé cuts her off, her voice authoritative and stern enough to quiet the sergeant down. “I appreciate your bravery, but there’s no way out. We can’t run forever; even when the battle with the Death Star ends, the Imperials likely won’t retreat from Yavin IV. They’re more likely to send *even more* troops.”

“General... I just don’t think Vader can be reasoned with.”

If it were anyone other than herself, Padmé doesn’t think Vader would listen at all. But if she could get him alone, she may be able to negotiate some sort of deal that would save her soldiers. Even if Leia is unable to rescue her, it wouldn’t be *too* detrimental to the Alliance if she were captured.

“I have a plan,” Padmé tries to reassure the sergeant. “Don’t worry. The whole point of us coming here was to buy time.”

When the sergeant looks doubtful, Padmé places her hands on her hips. “Have I ever let the Alliance down before?” she asks her.

Sergeant Mallorus shakes her head, and Padmé sees some of the other soldiers do the same in agreement. “No, General,” replies Mallorus.

“Hide in the basement,” she commands them. “It’s behind the hidden panel in the floor—you’ve been in there before, I think, Sergeant Mallorus.”

The sergeant nods. “Yes, General,” replies Mallorus. “But what about you?”

“I’m going to the top of the tower,” Padmé says. ‘The elevator is the first thing Vader will see when he walks in here. It’s the first place he’ll look.’ When she catches the sergeant’s worried expression, she adds, “Don’t worry about me; I can handle myself.”

Mallorus’s face is pale with terror, but she nods her head. “Let’s go, everyone,” she tells the other soldiers, and they head towards the entrance to the basement.

Padmé takes a deep breath in an attempt to steady herself. She is counting on Vader’s soft spot for her—hopefully, he would want her to come with him enough to extend his offer of surrender to her soldiers.

She knows she’s taking a risk concerning her earpiece, too. If Leia opened the communication line, she may overhear part of she and Vader’s conversation. It would be easy for an eavesdropper to figure out exactly what is going on; she has no idea what Vader is going to say to her, and what she will say to him.

Padmé presses a button on the side of her earpiece to open the line with Leia. She would have to eliminate that risk; there’s no way Leia is ready to learn that Vader is her father.

“Leia?” she calls.

“Yes?” her daughter answers back, concern bleeding into her tone. “Is something wrong?”

“We’re in the communication center,” Padmé tells her. “I’m stalling Vader for as long as I can, but I won’t be able to buy much more time.”

“Okay,” sighs Leia. “The transport is ready, but the battle isn’t over yet. I’ll be there soon, I promise. Just hold tight. And remember—”

But rather than continuing to listen to Leia, Padmé removes the earpiece, drops it to the ground, and crushes it with her boot. It snaps in two, leaving some of the wires exposed. Leia would probably assume that the earpiece was damaged somehow, or the communication was jammed. It would leave her daughter frantic with worry for her, but it would be short-lived—Padmé hopes.

If Leia needed to reach her, she could call her on her commlink. That way, Padmé would have to accept the call, first, and Leia wouldn’t be able to overhear her conversation with Vader.

A loud roaring sound makes Padmé flinch, and she turns to see a glow of a red lightsaber, the light much harsher in the darkness of the compound, sticking through the blast door. In the path of Vader’s lightsaber, there is a short line of molten metal and embers, and the sound of his saber meeting metal is deafening

Padmé’s commlink beeps with an incoming call—likely Leia. But instead of answering right away, Padmé opens the elevator door and steps inside. She selects the up button, and the

doors close.

As the elevator ascends to the tower, Padmé answers the call on her commlink.

“Padmé?” Leia almost shouts.

“Yes?” she answers.

“Oh, thank Force you’re alright!” exclaims her daughter. “What happened?”

“An Imperial yanked my earpiece out and crushed it,” Padmé lies. “I got into the elevator to escape them, but I have a feeling Vader will pursue me to the tower—once the elevator comes back down.”

Leia is silent for a moment, but then she says, “Luke is about the launch the final attack on the Death Star. It’ll be minutes, now. Are you going to be okay?”

“I think so,” Padmé tells her. “Don’t worry, I have a plan. But I’ve got to go now.”

She presses the end button on her commlink, leaving her in silence.

Hopefully, by the time Leia arrives, Padmé will be able to negotiate with Vader to release her soldiers. If not... then they will have sacrificed their lives for her, and she doesn’t know how she would cope with that.

She reaches the top of the tower and steps out of the elevator. Padmé watches as the doors close so that the elevator can descend, knowing that the next person to walk through those doors will be Darth Vader.

Nerves bundle up in her stomach as she looks to the sky. She knows that Vader won’t hurt her, but she can’t say the same for the rebel soldiers. Their fate is in his hands now, and Padmé is nowhere near comfortable with that.

He spared before Leia for her—perhaps he’ll show mercy again if she asks.

She peers over the railing and sees some of Vader’s Stormtroopers outside the compound. Some of them may be stationed inside, but hopefully, they didn’t find the secret entrance to the basement.

Padmé returns to the center of the tower and trains her eyes back on the sky. In the distance, she can see the ominous Death Star behind a thin veil of clouds. It looks almost like a moon from where she stands, save for the large crater where its superlasers are.

It isn’t long before Vader arrives. She hears the elevator doors slide open and turns around, her cape flowing behind her as she moves.

He is alone, and his lightsaber is put away, fastened to his belt. He must have assumed that she would be alone, too—does that mean that he knows the rebels are hiding somewhere in the compound? Is he conducting a search for them?

“What was the point of running if you were just going to wait here to be found?” he asks her. The rumble of his voice doesn’t startle her or catch her off guard; she’s starting to become more accustomed to how he sounds now.

She notices that he keeps a cautious distance—he’s still standing in front of the elevator door and hasn’t taken a single step towards her.

“Why launch a ground attack when you could just let this moon be destroyed?” Padmé poses her own question rather than answering his.

She pivots around and walks to the edge of the tower, leaning against the railing and looking out over the forest. The sound of his respirator follows her.

“You know why.”

Padmé turns back to face him. He’s closer now, but still at a distance. Vader is in the center of the tower now, and Padmé is at the edge.

“It seems a bit excessive,” she remarks, pressing her back into the rail.

“I—if you died...” he trails off, seemingly unsure of what to say. “I already lost you once.”

“But Yavin IV isn’t going to be destroyed,” Padmé says, trying to sound confident. “So, you’ve risked lives for nothing.”

“*You* are not nothing,” he replies.

She feels her heart flutter for a moment but forces herself to maintain her composure. Padmé says and shakes her head, casting her gaze down to the floor. “If you came here for me... I’ll come with you, on one condition.”

He does not respond, but instead listens to what she is going to say next.

“Let my soldiers go,” she demands. “And after I see that they are safe, I’ll leave with you.”

Vader pauses, thinking Padmé’s offer over. “I suppose enough of them have died today,” he then replies.

“So, is that a yes, then?” Padmé prompts.

He nods. “However, we cannot let them go if we don’t know where they are.”

Padmé bites to her lip—so they hadn’t found them, yet. But still, Vader knows they’re in the compound somewhere. She supposes that eventually, they would have been discovered.

Before she tells him where they are, the memory of Vader slashing through rebel soldiers flickers through her mind. Padmé reminds him sternly, “If *any* of them are killed—”

“They won’t be. You have my word,” Vader promises. A Sith’s word isn’t worth much, but when given to her, perhaps it is.

“They’re in the basement,” Padmé admits. “There’s a secret panel in the floor that leads to it.”

He nods and pulls out his holocommunicator. A Stormtrooper commander materializes on the communicator, and says, “Yes, my lord?”

“The rebels are located behind a secret floor panel,” Vader informs him. “But do not kill them. Allow them to leave, and do not pursue them.”

"It will be done, my lord," replies the Stormtrooper with a respectful bow. Vader ends the call, and then the holographic figure vanishes.

"You may watch them leave from here," Vader tells her, "so you know that I am keeping my word."

And sure enough, in a few minutes, Vader tells her to look down. When she does, she sees the rebels being marched out of the compound by Stormtroopers. They head into the woods and disappear, hopefully heading to safety. It is up to them now to reach the evacuation transports.

Padmé sighs in relief, but there is something eating at her. She furrows her brow and shakes her head, her heart heavy.

"You know that we can't... be together," she tells him tentatively. Even if she thought Vader would allow her to see his face, she could never truly be at his side, never truly become more loyal to him than to the Rebel Alliance. They will always be on opposite sides of the war.

"It isn't my fault that Obi-Wan left me to burn," he retorts defensively, his tone slightly agitated now. He is tense now, the muscles beneath his clothing quickly growing rigid.

"That's not what I meant," Padmé says, her voice soft and soothing. It seems to be effective, because Vader's tense shoulders seem to relax. She stops leaning against the railing and stands upright. "What I mean is... we won't truly be companions. I won't work with you, and I won't work with the Empire. We can never go back to how we were before, not while you insist that Anakin is gone." Padmé doesn't even know if Anakin's unconditional love applies to her anymore, even if Vader cares for her.

Vader doesn't argue with her; perhaps he thinks she'll come around. *I won't*, she promises herself.

Instead of countering her, Vader responds with something unexpected. "For years," he tells her, "I mourned my dead wife. It wasn't until ten years ago that I believed I had let you go, for the most part. Sometimes things would remind me of you, and it would hurt, but other than that, I didn't dwell on your death often."

Why is he telling me this? she wonders. She doesn't have time to ask, for there is no break in his words.

"I thought I had buried you. I had become stronger because of it; I no longer felt crippled by my grief and guilt over what I *thought* I had done to you."

She can't imagine what those years without her must have been like. He must have felt overwhelmed with agony, he must have *drowned* in it. Perhaps that is why Vader is so cruel sometimes: because pain molded him into who he is now.

"But now that you're here, now that I know you're alive—I don't care if we can't be... how we were all those years ago. I just want you to be safe."

She doesn't think that's entirely true; she's sure that at least part of Vader does care that the romantic and sexual parts of their relationship are gone, though she doesn't say that.

"Safe?" she inquires. "Safe from what? Your Empire is what is endangers me."

He shakes his head. "If the Emperor knew you were alive..." he stops there, as if he doesn't want to go on. "By going with me, I could ensure he doesn't find out that you're alive. But if one of his scouts or spies identifies you, the Emperor may try to kill you. At least if you were with me, I would be able to protect you."

It does make sense, admittedly. If the Emperor lied to Vader about Padmé's death, about him killing her, he probably did it to push Vader further into darkness. With her alive, Vader's progress as a Sith would be threatened. Perhaps the Emperor truly did believe that Padmé died, but even then, he still lied about Vader killing her.

"Then *leave* the Emperor," she tries to argue. Padmé knows that it's a desperate plea, that she's reaching, but she doesn't care. "Abandon him, abandon the Empire. You don't have to serve him."

"I can't," he tells her. If not for the distortion of his voice, he would have sounded lost and hopeless. "I'm not strong enough."

"You could be," she counters quickly. "Seek out healing procedures. There is definitely *something* that can be done—a lung transplant, airway repair... there are even life support machines that be put inside of your lungs. You wouldn't have to wear the suit—you wouldn't have to rely on the Emperor anymore. He's kept you weak for *years*."

When Vader goes silent, Padmé continues to press. "There's conflict within you. I know there is." And she hopes that with her words, she is creating even more doubt of the Emperor within him.

"*There is no conflict*," snaps Vader. She seems to have pushed him over the edge now, because he's clenching his fists at his side. But she doesn't think he's angry at her—he's angry at *himself*.

Padmé wants to step towards him, but she realizes that if she does that, it will be more difficult for Leia to retrieve her from the tower. She keeps to the edge instead but continues the argument with Vader.

"Deny it all you want," she sighs, crossing her arms. "But I refuse to believe—"

And then suddenly, the Death Star looming in the sky explodes. Padmé gasps as the battle station breaks apart into dust and rings of white, swiftly expanding until there are only fragments left floating in space. Within mere seconds, the most feared weapon in the galaxy is reduced to pieces and particles—it was a truly amazing, uplifting sight, but Padmé's triumph fades as she realizes Luke may not have made it out in time. She will find out soon, she supposes.

Vader turns, and she hears a falter in his respirator.

"*What?*" he exclaims, but the words come out as more of a harsh growl than anything. "But *how*..."

Darth Vader quickly contains his shock, however, because he turns back to Padmé. She is sure that if she could see his face, it would be full of surprise and disappointment. "It seems I underestimated your rebel friends," Vader admits.

"I told you Yavin IV wouldn't be destroyed," she replies, her words a more passive version of 'I told you so.' Padmé almost adds, *like Alderaan*, to the end of her sentence, but she thinks better of it. If she brought that up, it would only lead to an argument about Bail Organa, a topic she doesn't want to engage in at the moment.

"It is a disappointment, but the Empire will recover quickly," he says, his voice betraying nothing. She wonders if he is actually full of rage right now; she remembers Anakin *hated* losing. If he does feel that way, he isn't letting it show to her.

"Now," Vader continues. "We should be on our way, before more Imperial troops arrive. I doubt you want to linger when they do."

Horrific images of another Imperial invasion floods Padmé's mind. For a few moments, all she can see is Imperial ships bombarding the Rebel base, troops raiding their compounds and temples, slaughtering every rebel in sight... She shudders at those thoughts and tries to push them away.

"Right," she says with a reluctant nod. Padmé glances to the side to see that the rebels have started to evacuate, and transports are starting to leave the system. She spots a ship heading in her direction. It is of a similar design to the old Republic gunships, small with a thick width and wings at the top rather than the middle.

I need to buy more time, she tells herself.

"And I'm guessing the Empire isn't taking any prisoners?" Padmé asks, even though she knows the answer.

Vader pauses, his respirator faint and drowned out by the sound of ship engines and distant gunfire. "I cannot extend the same mercy to every rebel as I did to your soldiers," he tells her. "Rebels are rebels."

I'm a rebel," she tries to argue.

She hears him sigh. "You know it isn't the same."

When Padmé says nothing, he continues, "I'll call my shuttle." Just as Vader is reaching for his holocommunicator, the same ship Padmé saw earlier pulls up to the tower.

Padmé turns around and the sliding door opens, revealing Leia, Obi-Wan, R2-D2, and C-3PO.

She flinches at the sound of Vader's lightsaber igniting, and a lapse of fear comes over her like a shadow. But then she realizes that the saber must be for Obi-Wan, not for her—*of course*.

Obi-Wan raises his hand, and Padmé looks back to see that Vader is suddenly thrown back against the elevator by the Force, his body slamming against it with a *thud*.

"Take my hand!" Leia yells, extending her arm out of the ship. Padmé quickly takes it and is pulled onto the vessel with Obi-Wan's help.

Before the sliding doors close, she gazes at Vader one last time. Her eyes are soft with the shadow of regret, and they say, *I'm sorry*. Then the door closes, cutting off her vision from him.

As the ship advances into the atmosphere of Yavin IV, Padmé wonders when she will see him again.

chapter xi: cymoon-1, part i.

PRELUDE, PART I

After about a week following the Battle of Yavin, Darth Vader was summoned by the Emperor. He felt uneasy as he knelt at the holoprojector, but he tried to swallow down his anxieties. As soon as he touched the ground, the hooded figure of the Emperor appeared as a blue hologram.

“What is my bidding, Master?” asked Vader.

“Rise, Lord Vader,” the Emperor replied, and Vader did as he was told. “I was informed that Padmé Amidala is still alive.”

His heartbeat came to an abrupt stop and he froze, as if the Emperor’s words had instantly incased him ice. Fear gripped at him; would the Emperor try to kill her?

Rather than trying to speak, Vader allowed the Emperor to continue. “Why didn’t you tell me, Lord Vader? You had her in custody when you captured the Princess’s ship.”

Blast it, he thought. He should have known better than to think that he could have hidden Padmé from the Emperor.

“I... thought it would not be a concern to you,” he lied. Vader did not dare mention that the Emperor had deceived him about her death, as he had told Vader that in his anger, he had killed his own wife.

“The only reason it concerns me is because she is a rebel general,” said the Emperor. Vader didn’t believe that, but he decided against openly questioning his master. “She could be very dangerous for the Empire, with someone of her experience and popularity leading the rebel forces.”

Darth Vader knew that the Emperor’s concern was not misplaced. During her time as a Senator of the Republic, Padmé was adored by millions, and was a very strong leader. She caused quite the stir from time to time, too, especially with the Separatists.

“Yes,” Vader agreed. “That is why I have been looking for her.”

“But surely... that is not the only reason,” drawled the Emperor. Vader stiffened again, and if he had been before anyone else, his hand would have curled into a fist.

“What does it matter?” Vader said, choosing his words carefully. “Amidala loves Anakin Skywalker... someone who is long dead now.” The Emperor—and, Vader too—spoke of his past self as if he was a completely different person from who he is now. By saying that Padmé loves Skywalker, he was implying that she didn’t care for Vader at all. Vader was not entirely sure of how she felt, but it may be important that the Emperor has a very clear idea of Padmé’s feelings. Otherwise, it could put her in danger.

“I see.” For a moment, Vader thought he saw the ghost of a smile across the Emperor’s shadowed face. “So, there was no happy reunion?”

“No,” Vader replied bitterly. He recalled Obi-Wan Kenobi blowing him back against the elevator, the Organa princess extending her hand to Padmé, and his wife taking it. She had said *nothing* to him, only glanced back with a soft expression on her face. What was he supposed to do with *that*? Forget about it and move on? Not likely.

Half of a chuckle slipped out of the Emperor’s mouth. Anger flared up within Darth Vader; *of course* the Emperor would find it amusing that Padmé had turned away from him. “That must infuriate you, Lord Vader,” his master commented.

He let the fire within him blaze. “Yes, master,” Vader responded. It was not a complete lie.

“As it is your responsibility to lead the military, and to put down the Rebellion, you must *deal* with Amidala,” the Emperor ordered him.

He felt a pang in his chest as he realized the weight of his master’s words. “Kill her?” he questioned, making sure that no emotion had slipped into his tone.

“Not necessarily,” replied his master. “But she must be dealt with. I don’t care how you do it, however, if you let her live, she must comply with the Empire, or... it would not be in our best interest to keep her around.” He supposed that the Emperor was much more concerned with the destruction of the Death Star than Padmé, but still, he couldn’t have her causing problems.

“I will do what is needed,” Vader said. And it was true—he would. He hadn’t given up on Padmé, though their most recent encounter left him feeling deeply discouraged. Vader wouldn’t allow her to die; he wouldn’t lose her again. Instead, he told himself that he could have it all. It wasn’t going to be easy, but Vader was never one to back down from a challenge.

“And... Lord Vader,” began the Emperor, “have you considered the possibility that Skywalker’s child survived?”

“She told me that it was a stillborn,” replied Vader.

“But if Amidala survived, there is a chance she lied to you. She is a rebel, after all, and you are the enforcer of the Empire.” The Emperor, though he didn’t know it, was not placing seeds of doubt within Vader. No, he was deepening the roots of his skepticism for Padmé’s word. The Emperor had a point, and it wouldn’t be the first time that Padmé lied to him. If the child lived, it made sense for her to hide it from him.

“Yes, master,” he said. “I will look into it.” Vader was not keen on the fact that the Emperor probably wanted to use the child to replace him, as his master always honored the Sith rule of two. But if Vader’s son lived, together, they could bring down the Emperor.

An image formed in his mind. Himself, standing before a throne with Padmé at his side, and their son, *Luke*, in front of them. But instead of a man in a mask and suit, he pictured serious blue eyes, dirty blonde hair, unmarred skin—save for the scar on the right side of his face—and black robes. Padmé, who was dressed in an elegant midnight blue gown, had her hand resting on their son’s shoulder. He was blonde like Anakin but had eyes like his mother’s, gentle and deep brown.

He was brought back to reality when the Emperor told him, “I’ll leave you to it, Lord Vader.” Once Vader bowed, the Emperor ended the call and the hologram vanished.

In the weeks after his talk with his master, Vader sent some of his most loyal informants to search for information about new technologies that could replace or upgrade his suit, and even methods that could heal some of his injuries. He supposed that Padmé could be correct about the Emperor trying to keep him weak by confining him to the suit. Vader wasn't completely convinced yet, but it was worth considering.

All the while, Vader was still scouring the galaxy for the rebels, and he was confident that when he found them, he would find Padmé, too. Now that the Emperor knew that his wife was alive, he sent out bounty posters through the holonet, using a photo of her when she was in her late twenties and a senator. There were already bounties out for the Organa princess, too, and for the rebel pilot. Vader knew that *someone* had made the lucky shot and destroyed the Death Star, but he had no idea who. He was determined to find out; though he hadn't necessarily been too fond of the Death Star, publicly executing the pilot would distinguish the hopes of rebel supporters and rally the loyalty of imperials.

Between the Alliance, Padmé, his possibly alive son, Princess Leia, and the rebel pilot, he had a lot of work ahead of him.

PRELUDE, PART II

The Empire pursued them relentlessly. Padmé had forgotten exactly how many weeks had gone by since the Battle of Yavin, but she was certain that it has been at least two. Since destroying the Death Star, the rebels had not been allowed the luxury of staying in one place for long. It seemed that nearly everywhere they went, they were met with the fury of the Empire.

They had been branded terrorists by the Empire, but the new propaganda that emerged since the Death Star's destruction was no worse than before. It had, however, received more of a response from Imperial loyalists. That was to be expected—they had, after all, killed millions of Imperials aboard the Death Star. Though it was grim, Padmé has convinced herself that it was the right solution; such a powerful Empire could not often be reasoned with, unfortunately. The peaceful times of negotiation ended with the Republic.

For about a week, Padmé and a few other rebels, including Luke, Leia, Han, Chewbacca, the droids, and Obi-Wan, stayed on Tatooine. It wasn't ideal, but at least Han and Luke knew their way around enough to keep them out of trouble. Of course, the Empire does have influence on the planet, but not enough for Tatooine to be considered completely under their control.

During their time on Tatooine, Obi-Wan began instructing Luke and Leia in the ways of the Force. They shared Anakin's old lightsaber, as they hadn't been able to construct a new one for Leia yet.

After gathering enough supplies and planning a new mission, Padmé and the group of rebels decided to flee Tatooine after seeing holograms of their bounties, with their faces attached to them. Han and Luke didn't have one, but Padmé and Leia did. They had been in a bar, most of them masked or hooded, when they spotted the wanted notices.

As she stared into the eyes of her own picture, which was definitely taken when she was in her twenties, she wondered if Vader himself had sent the wanted sign across the galaxy.

PRIORITY CRIMINAL:

PADMÉ AMIDALA

WANTED FOR TREASON AGAINST THE EMPIRE

GENERAL OF THE REBEL ALLIANCE

ALIVE AND UNHARMED

She wasn't shocked to see that the Empire, or rather, Vader, wanted her 'alive and unharmed,' but the rest of the rebels were, as they had never seen that on a wanted notice before. Padmé felt rather bitter when she saw that Leia's wanted sign also listed her as a priority criminal but lacked the same instructions as Padmé's—*dead or alive*, it read. But she did know that she couldn't completely fault Vader for it; to him, Leia was just a thorn in the Empire's side and not his daughter.

"What's a priority criminal?" Luke asked Padmé, leaning in and whispering.

Padmé, whose face was heavily shadowed by the blue hood of her robes, replied, "They're considered the most important criminals to the Empire, and are brought directly to Vader."

She listened as the bounty hunters studied the wanted signs; they seemed, of course, particularly interested in Padmé's. She couldn't blame them; the price attached to her bounty was worthy of a double-take.

"Padmé Amidala?" a masked bounty hunter said. "You ever heard that name before?"

"Nope," another replied with a shake of her head. "But she's awful young and pretty to be a rebel general."

"Leia Organa's just a teenager and she's one of 'em, too," the other bounty hunter remarked. "This wanted notice is unusual, though. You ever seen the Empire ask for a *rebel general* 'unharmed?'"

"Never thought I'd see it."

Padmé could feel Luke and Leia's stares on her, but she tried to ignore it. Explaining why Vader hadn't locked her in the detention block and tortured her was difficult enough, and now this.

After seeing some of their wanted holos, it would have been foolish to stay on Tatooine. Padmé hates having to run all the time—she had done it years ago with the Separatists, and now the Empire.

END OF PRELUDE.

Having fled Tatooine only a day ago, Padmé, Luke, Leia, and Han are on their way to Cymoon-1 to destroy the Empire's main weapons facility. Han, though he claimed to have purchased the ship they are on, most certainly stole it, along with armor that Jabba uses for

his bodyguards. They will be disguising themselves as an envoy for Jabba the Hutt. The real envoy is being held by the rebel fleet, as they were intercepted days ago.

With the Death Star gone and the Empire in a bout of chaos, now is the time to end the Empire once and for all. The Rebellion leaps at every chance it gets.

Their ship lowers from the sky, having only recently broken the atmosphere. As they near the ground, Padmé peers out the window and sees a great expanse of factories beneath clouds of smoke. She wonders if Cymoon-1 was beautiful before the rise of the Empire.

“There’s not much to look at, is there?” Leia says. Her daughter, like Luke and Padmé, is wearing body guard armor from Tatooine and is masked so that any Imperials would not recognize them. “Hopefully, by the time we’re finished there, that weapons factory will just be rubble.”

“Hopefully,” repeats Padmé with a nod. “I don’t know, Leia, I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Then don’t,” Han interjects from the pilot’s seat. *As if it were that simple*, Padmé thinks.

“Are you still shaken up after Tatooine?” her son asks. From behind his visor, Padmé can see his concern-filled eyes.

“A bit,” she admits. Padmé now lives with the anxiety that not only is the Empire after her and her children, but now bounty hunters, too. She is not afraid of them harming her, and she is confident that she can handle herself, but still, having to constantly look over her shoulder is far from ideal.

“I don’t know, I just get anxious sometimes,” Padmé continued. She was not very concerned about herself; it was really Leia who she worried for. *Dead or alive*, the holographic words flashed in her head again. If they were caught by the Empire on this mission, Padmé may have to tell Vader the truth about who Leia is—otherwise, she might be killed.

“Everything will work out,” her daughter tries to assure her, placing a hand on Padmé’s shoulder. “Just try to focus on the mission for now.”

The ship touches down on one of the factory platforms, where an imperial officer and Stormtroopers await them. Padmé feels her stomach twist as Han lowers the ramp to the shuttle and leads Leia, Luke, Padmé, and Artoo onto the platform. She is glad that her face is hidden behind a mask, otherwise, the pallor of her face may give them away.

The imperial officer greets them and introduces himself as Overseer Aggadeen, and says to Han, “Whom do I have the honor of addressing?”

It is no surprise when Han goes overboard with the pleasantries. “The official emissary of His High Exaltedness, the illustrious Jabba the Great, Mightiest of all Hutts, master of Tatooine and grand warlord of the Outer Rim,” Han replies. Padmé keeps waiting for the smuggler to burst out laughing, but to her relief, the moment never comes. She is sure he will crack a joke about it later, though.

“But you can call me Han,” he adds casually. ‘Han Solo. Pleasure to meet ya, Aggie,’ Han extends his hand to the imperial officer, who reluctantly shakes it. *Aggie?* Padmé thinks, smiling behind her mask. “I’m sure you’ve heard of me,” continues Han with a confident smile. “Been a pilot for Jabba for a lotta years.”

The imperial officer mentions that they never hear about smugglers, unless they are being executed. Han does not appear taken aback, however, and maintains his composure. A droid then approaches Han and confirms his identity, but then it mentions that Han has a bounty on his head for 50,000 credits.

It is nothing compared to the Empire’s bounties on Padmé and Leia, but for a Hutt to put so much attention on one smuggler certainly did say something.

Han tries to play it off by saying, “Ah, I can explain that. It’s a funny story really...”

But the officer does not seem interested at all. “Perhaps some other time,” he waves away Han’s offer of an explanation. The officer then looks at Han’s three “bodyguards,” scrutinizing each of them. Padmé remains completely still, her body relaxed in feigned tranquility.

“Your bodyguards must leave their weapons here. You will all be scanned for blasters,” says the officer. He continues with a warning, informing them that having any hidden blasters will not be tolerated.

Han turns to them and says, “You heard him, bodyguards.” They comply with the officer’s request and hand over their weapons. It doesn’t worry Padmé, though, because they are hiding more in the pockets of their armor, and the imperials won’t get the chance to scan them.

As they begin to walk into the factory, led by the officer, Padmé whispers into the microphone of her earpiece. “Everyone, hold your positions,” she tells their allies—Chewbacca and Threepio, are waiting nearby to help them with their mission.

Threepio begins to ramble, going on about how he was worried they would be shot on sight. Leia sighs and hisses, “Threepio, shut up.”

They enter the factory, and Han and the officer begin to talk, until the officer gestures at a shielded room with a table and seats. “The negotiator will arrive shortly. You will await him within.”

But that isn’t a part of the plan. “I bet it’s nice and quiet in there,” remarks Han.

“It is shielded, yes,” replies the officer.

“You know, I kinda prefer it out here where it’s all loud and noisy,” Han tells the officer, who rolled his eyes in response.

“Don’t be idiotic,” he chides. “Why in the world would we hold negotiations on the factory floor?”

Come on, Han, thinks Padmé. The officer does have a point, and Han’s excuses aren’t working. They would have to figure something else out.

Padmé looks at Artoo and gives him a nod, hoping that he will take matters into his own hands. And sure enough, a sickly green substance begins to flow from one of Artoo's openings and quickly pools onto the floor under the Stormtroopers' feet.

"Your droid appears to be leaking fluids," says the officer, his voice scathing with irritation.

"Um... Artoo?" Han inquires.

The astromech droid then shocks the fluid with a zap of electricity, lighting up the slick floor under the Stormtrooper's with bright bolts of energy. They fall to the floor after the shock, disabled.

Leia, Luke, and Padmé leap into action, taking down the remaining troopers with kicks and punches, until only the four of them and the officer are left standing. They rip off their bodyguard masks and armor, revealing their true identities, and the officer's eyes widen when he sees two of the Empire's most wanted criminals standing before him.

"P-Padmé Amidala and Leia Organa?" he stutters. "This is insanity! What kind of envoy are you?"

Han raises his blaster to the officer's face. "The *rebellious* kind," he replies with a confident smirk.

Leia steps forward, the skirt of her white bodysuit billowing as she moves. "Which way to the main power core?" she asks the officer, revealing her blaster.

But he isn't willing to give an answer. "*Rebels*," says the officer with disgust. "You've just... *doomed* yourselves. This moon is the most heavily guarded base in the galaxy. The audacity, coming in here with two of the Empire's most wanted, thinking you'll escape alive!" He glares at Padmé and Leia as he speaks, and Padmé returns his stare.

"We'll be just fine," she tells the officer. "Let us worry about the specifics."

"Now, which way?" Han prompts the officer once again.

He scoffs. "I am a sworn officer of the Empire. I'd *never* give anything away to rebel scum."

Just as Leia is about to raise her blaster threateningly, Artoo beeps at the officer and a metal arm extends from the droid with a pair of prongs at the end, which are buzzing with bolts of electricity.

The officer points down one of the hallways. "That way," he tells them without hesitation.

Padmé smirks to herself; *that was almost too easy*, she thinks.

"Thanks," says Leia, and then she swiftly punches the officer in the face. He falls to the ground against the impact.

"Leia!" chides Padmé. "There was no reason to do that."

But her daughter only sighs, and then smiles slightly. "I'd say 'you're not my mother,' but..."

Padmé would have laughed if they were in a different situation, so instead she just shakes her head.

The group moves forward quickly, running to the hallway the officer told them to go to, Artoo trailing behind them. Padmé speaks into her earpiece, “We’re in, move into phase two.”

“Threepio, you worthless rust bucket, you better not have damaged my ship,” Han warns the droid through his own earpiece. Threepio is watching over the *Millennium Falcon*, which Chewbacca piloted to Cymoon-1.

“For once, sir, the Millennium Falcon actually appears to be in good working order,” replies Threepio, his tone upbeat despite Han’s gruffness. Padmé chuckles slightly to herself. “As we hoped, Chewbacca was able to pilot us undetected through the moon’s orbital debris field.” Threepio then explains that the Falcon is hidden in the refuse fields nearby, where all of the discarded metal parts from the factory are dumped.

“If I may say so, Captain Solo,” Threepio continues, “I do find it disconcerting that your vessel continues to be so easily mistaken for *garbage*.”

“I have to say that I agree,” remarks Leia with a small grin.

“And I second that,” says Luke. Han shoots them both a look.

“*You’ll* be garbage if you mess this up, goldenrod!” Han tells Threepio.

Now inside of the hallway, Han gives Threepio strict instructions to remember to hit autopilot when they give him the signal. The Falcon is their only way off of this planet, so it is imperative that Threepio does his job correctly.

“May the Force be with you, sir,” says Threepio.

“Hopefully, it’s with us all,” whispers Padmé as she leans up against the wall, peeking past the doorway to see a group of Stormtroopers in the next room. Han, Luke, and Leia mirror her, each of them pressed against the wall to stay out of sight.

Padmé watches as the Stormtroopers walk into the corridor, leaving the main power core exposed and vulnerable to their attack.

Now that the coast is clear, the four rebels and Artoo enter the room that holds the power core, which is a long, paneled pillar that reaches all the way to the ceiling.

“This is definitely the central power station,” Padmé tells everyone.

“Artoo, plug in and shut down all safety restraints,” Leia instructs Artoo, nodding towards the computer in the room. Artoo beeps in response and follows Leia’s orders.

Han approaches the main power core and retrieves a tool from his belt. “We’ll rig this thing to blow,” he says. “Luke, Padmé, you keep an eye out for Stormtroopers.”

“Countdown’s started,” Han tells Leia. He has now rigged the main power core to self-destruct. “Ten minutes to overload. Time to get moving—Luke, Padmé, let’s go.”

Luke and Padmé are both still stationed at each doorway, and they turn their heads when Han calls them.

Leia has other things on her mind than the mission right now, though. She is amazed that Han would go to such lengths to help them; she originally thought he was nothing but a selfish smuggler, but he has proved her wrong twice now.

“Thank you, Han,” Leia tells him. And she means it, from the bottom of her heart. She knows what a huge risk it is to side with the Rebellion. Han turns to her, his eyebrows raising in surprise.

“Wait ’til we’re on the Falcon, a few light years away from here,” replies Han casually, like Leia’s words are no big deal. “Then you can thank me in style, princess.” He gives her a smirk, and Leia returns it with a look that says, *No, really*.

She wonders why Han isn’t taking her seriously. After all, he has put himself on the line to help them, which is no small deed.

“No matter what happens next, I just want you to know, I appreciate what you’ve done here today,” Leia tells him, her voice soft but still serious. Han seems to realize that she wasn’t kidding at all, because his eyes widen for a moment.

“You’ve earned my respect as well, Captain Solo,” Padmé chimes in.

“Yeah, Han,” Luke then joins in. “You put your face in front of the Empire today, for us. I mean... that’s a big statement, Han.”

“Well,” says Han, placing his hands on his hips and looking down at the floor. “It was the only way to pull off this crazy stunt.” His gaze finds Leia again, and for a second, she thinks she sees nervousness pass over Han’s face.

“But now the Empire will know that Han Solo is one of us,” Leia tells him. “Why would you take such a huge risk like that? What is it you really *want*, Han?” And she’s genuinely curious: why would a smuggler go through so much trouble to aid the Rebellion? Her eyes are fixed on him now and she can sense that he is beginning to crack under pressure.

He looks away for a moment. “Um... maybe now’s not the time to...”

“We should get going,” interjects Padmé. Leia knows that she’s right; she let her inquiries lead her astray.

“Right,” Han says with a nod, his composure immediately returning. He contacts Threepio through his earpiece. “Threepio, hit the autopilot button. Get the Falcon in the air. Chewie, you stand by to clear that roof as soon as we give you the signal.”

But then the world freezes and suddenly shatters. Leia stiffens as a dark, ominous wave washes over her. Something has changed, but she can’t put her finger on it... all she can feel is a cramping in her stomach as ice continues to sweep through her body and her senses. It is a presence; it is like a great shadow of evil has materialized beside her... and yet no one is there. The feeling is hauntingly familiar, which only terrifies Leia even more.

“Luke...” she says quietly, looking at her brother. He has a shocked expression on his face and she knows that he has felt it, too. Obi-Wan has taught them how to sense presences, though they can’t always control it.

“What? What is it?” Han asks them.

“Is there something wrong?” she hears Padmé’s voice cut in, full of motherly concern.

“I...” Leia trails off. She closes her eyes for a moment and reaches out with her feelings, just as Obi-Wan taught her to do on Tatooine. Leia searches for the presence, for the shadow, and realization jolts through her as the sound of raspy breathing fills her ears and the image of Darth Vader’s mask flashes through her mind.

She lets out a gasp.

“Vader,” she says. “Vader is here.”

Everyone is frozen, paralyzed in fear and shock, until Padmé finally speaks.

“What? Are you sure?”

“I feel it, too,” Luke confirms. “He is here, Mother.” Padmé furrows her brow at that, but Leia notices that she doesn’t seem to be afraid, but instead, only worried. She checks her mother’s emotions through the Force to find out that she is correct; Padmé is not afraid at all, which confuses Leia. Why is it that Padmé is *never* afraid of Vader? Anyone in their right mind would be.

Leia hears Chewbacca gargling and roaring through the earpiece, and she looks at Han, prompting him to translate.

“A ship coming in?” Han exclaims. “Chewie, *what ship?*”

But Leia already knows the answer: *Vader’s ship*.

chapter xii: cymoon-1, part ii.

The moment Lord Vader's shuttle entered the atmosphere, his senses were alerted to Padmé's presence. It was like a beacon, reaching all the way from the ground to his ship far into the sky, brilliantly unmistakable. Her Force signature is warm, gentle, and reminds him of home, a concept Vader had almost long forgotten by now.

But that is not all—there are two other Force signatures, each of them teeming with raw, but unmastered power. He has not felt something like that in a very long time... not since he faced Obi-Wan on the Death Star. *Who could it be?* he wonders. Darth Vader tells himself that he will certainly find out. Perhaps they are lost Jedi, though he thought he had found all of them by now. Only Obi-Wan, Yoda, and a few less notable Jedi still escaped the Purge, hidden somewhere in the deep reaches of space.

He reaches out through the Force as his shuttle nears the surface, but he does not feel Obi-Wan here. But if Padmé is on Cymoon-1, at an imperial arms factory, she must be part of a rebel operation. He has no illusion of why she is here; they must be trying to destroy the factory.

Frustration flares up within him, and he feels the heat of rage flash through his body. The rebels, emboldened by the destruction of the Death Star, are now so confident that they would dare embark on such a dangerous mission. It is no surprise to him that Padmé is on this operation, as she was never one to shy away from action, but it irritates him nonetheless. By actively siding against the Empire, is siding against him, too.

He also considers that Padmé probably also knows that she is nearly invincible when it comes to the Empire. Vader is certain that Padmé knows that even if she gets captured, he would never allow for her to be executed or tortured. He hopes that if their paths cross, she won't expect him to spare her rebel comrades; he is not keen on saving members of the Rebellion, especially after the Death Star, and after Padmé broke their last deal. Vader does not intend on extending his mercy again.

Darth Vader's shuttle lands on the platform to the arms factory, and now that he is closer, he can feel that Padmé, and the two Force-sensitives, must be inside.

He saunters down the ramp of his shuttle and steps onto the platform, which is now surrounded by rows of Stormtroopers, rigid in salute. An officer begins walking to greet him, but Vader speaks before he can get a word out.

"There are rebels here," he informs the officer. "Put the entire factory on alert, now. Make an announcement that I want them alive."

He couldn't increase the risk of Padmé being killed in crossfire, nor would he risk her being mistaken for just another rebel.

"My lord? Rebels, *here?* How can you be so sure?" the officer questions him, clearly shocked by Vader's knowledge.

“Do not underestimate the Force,” Vader replies. “Do as I say, and *quickly*, before they can escape.”

“Yes, my lord,” says the officer with a respectful bow of his head. He then immediately marches away and says something into his commlink.

Vader turns to the Stormtroopers, who are still lined up at his shuttle. “Find the rebels,” he orders them. “Split up across the factory and then bring them to me.”

They do as they are told, and several groups of Stormtroopers hurry into the factory with Vader on their heels.

“Chewie! Stand down!” Han yells into his earpiece. “Do not fire! You take a shot at Vader and the whole factory will be on alert!”

“Are you crazy?” snaps Leia. As soon as she speaks, alarms begin to blare and red lights flash in the room and in the adjacent hallways.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Leia huffs. Before she can continue, they hear an announcement over the sound of the factory alarms.

“ALL TROOPS ON ALERT! ALL TROOPS ON ALERT!” says a booming voice. “REBELS HAVE INFILTRATED THE FACTORY! BY ORDER OF LORD VADER, FIND THEM AND BRING THEM TO HIM ALIVE!”

Padmé’s heart throbs anxiously in her chest—this is *exactly* what they didn’t need. Of course, as soon as she leaves the Outer Rim, Vader shows up. She knows that she can’t outrun him forever, and she doesn’t intend to. Eventually, he will outsmart her; she just didn’t expect it to be so soon. Padmé thought she would have more time with her children and the Rebellion, but she may be proven wrong today.

Leia growls in frustration, and then shouts into her own earpiece, “Chewbacca! If you have a shot at Vader, I *order* you to take it!”

“Leia, no!” Padmé insists. “Chewbacca, *don’t!* Vader will kill you an instant!” While she is concerned for Chewbacca, the thought of the Wookiee shooting at Vader makes her nervous. She doubts that Vader could be so easily killed, but the feeling remains.

“As a member of the Alliance Council and your general, I command you to *stand down!*” she tells Chewbacca. Leia shoots her a furious glare; though they are both generals, Padmé still outranks her. “This is *not* the time, Leia,” she tries to explain to her daughter.

If Padmé wasn’t a rebel, she’s sure that her fierceness would have been taken as concern for Vader, but luckily, no one questions her.

“Then when *is* the time, Padmé?” Leia bites back.

“But Leia,” interjects Luke, “Chewbacca’s blaster is no match for the Force.”

But Leia doesn’t heed her brother’s words. “Luke, give me your lightsaber,” Leia orders him. ‘Since you,’ she shoots a seething glare at Padmé, “won’t let Chewbacca take the shot at Vader, *I’ll* go after him.”

“Princess, what the hell—” begins Han, but he is soon cut off by Leia’s now frantic mother.

“Absolutely not! You haven’t completed your training! Do you have any idea how much stronger he is than you?” Padmé snaps in return. Her harsh tone is not out of anger, but out of fear and concern for the safety of her child. Facing Vader would be suicide, especially because he doesn’t know who she is.

“Come on, Mother is right,” Luke sides with Padmé again, and she gives him a look that says ‘thank you.’ “There’s no way I’m giving you my saber.”

“LOOK, everyone!” yells Han. “We’ve got to get the hell out of here!”

Padmé sighs and then nods. Han is right—they have no reason to stick around, and the factory is about to blow. With any luck, if Vader is already inside the factory, he would follow them out before the explosion. It’s too late to disable it now, though, and she couldn’t do that without looking like a traitor.

“Threepio, hit the autopilot button!” Padmé commands the droid.

But when he replies, they are informed that the autopilot button does not work, and that the *Millennium Falcon* is being dismantled by scavengers. Padmé’s heart sinks; this is just getting worse by the minute.

“Well, go out there and stop them!” Han tells Threepio. “There’s a blaster in the cockpit! Do whatever you have to do!”

Threepio seems uneasy but agrees to try his best to stop the scavengers. Padmé doesn’t have much faith in the droid, and she presumes that they’ll probably have to find a vehicle of some sort and reach the *Falcon* themselves.

“Come on, we’ve got to find another way out of here,” says Padmé, motioning the group forward. They follow her down the next hallway, but they are immediately intercepted by Stormtroopers.

“There they are! Set for stun!” yells one of the troopers, but Han instantly whips out his blaster and shoots him in the heart. As the other Stormtroopers configure their weapons, Luke unsheathes his lightsaber and begins tearing through them, while Leia, Han, and Padmé fire their blasters, each of them taking down several Stormtroopers.

They begin to retreat into another corridor as more Stormtroopers arrive. Padmé and Leia hastily slip through the doorway while Han covers them, before he joins them and then shuts the blast door.

But just as the doors begin to close, Padmé sees Luke dashing away from them. Her heart leaps into her throat—what is her son doing?

“Luke!” she calls out in panic, but he disappears through a doorway. The last thing Padmé sees is the Stormtroopers heading towards the blast door before it closes completely, obscuring her vision and cloaking them in shadow.

“That should keep ’em out for a while,” he says. “Hopefully,” Han adds, this time with a nervous damper in his tone.

“Great, now we’re trapped *and* Luke ran off,” Leia says, her voice sharpened by her frustration. “What the are we going to do now? How are we even going to get out of here?”

Padmé is about to agree, but then she sees a smirk curl up the side of Han’s face. “Heh,” he responds, his eyes fixed on something above them. “We *walk*, Your Highness.”

She turns and follows Han’s gaze to see that several imperial walkers are standing before them.

Luke wanders cautiously through an empty corridor, far from the Stormtroopers and his friends. He had felt something while he was fighting with his comrades, that *presence* again, and he decided to reach for it this time.

He knows how foolish this is, and he knows that he’s going to get an earful from his mother for it. But right now, Luke doesn’t care. He *has to* face the man who killed his father.

The dark Force signature coils through the hall, permeating the air, making it feel thick and heavy in Luke’s lungs. He can feel Vader moving closer, and even though he cannot see him yet, Luke draws his lightsaber, the blue light illuminating the planes of his face.

As if on cue, Vader steps out from around the corner and unsheathes his lightsaber. Its garish red glow looks malevolently violent Luke, and he is beginning to regret coming here. Fear’s cold fingers grip at him, but he heeds Ben’s lessons and tries to tide it in.

“*You*,” he says to Vader, his voice unwavering despite the terror that pokes at him like needles relentlessly.

Vader gives no visible reaction, but he does respond with a jab. “You hold that weapon like an untrained child,” Vader tells Luke. He finds himself shocked and unsettled at the depth and harshness of Vader’s voice, which he has never heard before until now. Everything about the man—or machine—is meant to be intimidating, from his towering height, dark suit, menacing-looking mask, and his voice.

“You have no right to it,” continues Vader, his voice even sharper now. “You, boy, are *no* Jedi.”

Luke furrows his brow; he knows that isn’t, not yet. But someday he will be. Still, he can’t help but feel almost infuriated that Vader would belittle him like that; he didn’t expect anything less, but that doesn’t soothe his anger.

“Who *are* you?” Vader inquires.

Luke retorts, “A lot of things.”

But his answer only seems to add fuel to Vader’s fire. “I asked you a *question*. You best *answer it* before you find your head rolling on the floor.”

He would have flinched if not for Ben’s training. Luke tries to recall everything he learned from his master on Tatooine, about focus and calmness in battle, about willpower and inner strength.

Luke’s eyes narrow at Vader. “You killed my *father*,” he tells him.

"I've killed very *many* fathers," drawls Vader, which only provokes even more anger within Luke. He is certain that Vader is *enjoying* this, as if he finds Luke's wish to avenge his dead father amusing. "You'll have to be more specific."

Vader stands still as Luke cries out in fury, unable to contain the inferno building inside him any longer. He strikes out at Vader, but the Sith Lord easily blocks his attack and their lightsabers clash, humming against one another and creating a blinding flash of green light.

Using the strength of his durasteel arms, Vader shoves Luke to the side, breaking the contact between their sabers and sending Luke slamming against the ground. Luke half expects Vader to strike him down right where he is, but the Dark Lord allows him to stand back up, perhaps out of sheer curiosity.

Luke is poised to attack again, his lightsaber raised, but he is waiting for the right moment. As he does, Vader fires an insult at him.

"This is most pathetic," says the Sith Lord. "You are not worth the seconds it would take to finish you. Who sent you here to die like this?"

Luke scowls at Vader. "Sure I'm worth it," he retorts. "I destroyed the Death Star, and now I'm going to help the Rebellion put an end to you *and* the Emperor!"

Vader stands completely still again, and he lowers his lightsaber. This confuses Luke, but also frustrates him. Vader must think that he is so foolish, that he is not to be taken seriously.

"Even if you kill me here today, Master Kenobi will find you," Luke continues, his tone caustic now, burning with anger. "Either way, you die!" He knows that Ben wouldn't be pleased if he saw him at the moment, but Luke pushes that thought out of his mind. Vader has killed countless rebels, murdered his father, and allowed his sister's home planet to be destroyed. He *deserves* death, and it's not like his absence would hurt the galaxy.

"That *old man* could never beat me in battle again," snarls Darth Vader. "You put too much faith in him, boy. Kenobi will disappoint you."

Again? Luke wonders, but he has no time to dwell on it.

He glares at Vader and swings at him once more. "For my *father!*"

But before Luke can even get close to Vader, the lightsaber flies out of his hand into Vader's. He must have used the Force to take it from him; *blast it*, why didn't Luke see that coming?

"*No!*" Luke exclaims, but even when he tries to use the Force to take the lightsaber back, Vader does not relent. He easily overpowers him, and the lightsaber does not budge.

Vader is beside himself.

The boy both perplexes and irritates him. His words are so proud, so bold, and he was ridiculously foolish to come here alone and think that he could take Vader. And yet... something in his gut tells him that this boy is more than just a stupid rebel.

There is a big *what if* bouncing off the walls of Vader's mind. What if this boy is the lost Skywalker child that Palpatine suspected? What if Padmé did indeed lie to him about their son's survival? She did say that their child was a boy, and that his name was Luke. Vader doesn't know the name of the teenage boy that stands before him, but he knows that he is here *with Padmé* on this moon, is being trained by none other than Obi-Wan Kenobi, and he appears to be around the same age as his son. *Nineteen*—his son would have been born nineteen years ago.

Of course, Vader's child would be Force-sensitive, and he can *feel* the boy's potential, even more staggering now that he has been somewhat trained by Obi-Wan.

He has already heard the rumor that the nameless but infamous rebel pilot is a simple farmer boy from Tatooine. *Tatooine*—his home planet.

Vader can see clear as day that this boy could potentially be his son—though he knows it may be a bit of a leap—and that is why he hesitates to attack him. The fact that he is here with Padmé is too suspicious; otherwise, Vader wouldn't have thought much about it.

If not for Vader's suspicions, he would have struck the boy down where he stood the moment he told him that he is the rebel pilot. But he couldn't risk being rash. If he killed his son, Padmé would never forgive him... and he isn't sure that he could forgive himself, either. Not to mention, he would be throwing away a potential power gain. Vader is not one to feel guilt often, and he has killed children before, but this is different. If this boy is his son, he can't possibly let him die.

The boy looks at him, stares him down with a bold defiance, despite his dire situation. He probably thinks he is going to die, but he doesn't ask for mercy.

Vader raises the boy's own lightsaber against him, even though he does not intend to use it.

"So... Obi-Wan Kenobi gave you this lightsaber. A shame he barely taught you how to wield it," Vader's words are full of venom as he speaks, and it can be heard even through his vocalizer. "He never did make much for a master."

"How would *you* know?" snaps Luke.

But Vader doesn't answer. "If you wish to live, you will tell me everything you know about the Rebellion, and you will lead me to your companions." Even if the boy isn't his son, he can still lead him to Padmé and the other rebels.

The boy does not falter, despite the weight of Vader's words. "I'd rather *die* than yield to you."

Vader almost sighs. He should have expected as much.

"Imperial prison it is, then," he says.

"I thought you said you were going to kill me?" Luke exclaims in surprise. He probably expected to be dead by now.

Vader's grip tightens around the lightsaber the boy was given by Obi-Wan, and he gives it a good look for the first time. He finds himself beyond shocked to see that he recognizes the hilt and the scratches on its surface.

No, he thinks. *It can't be.*

His mind thrusts him back into the past into a whirlwind of memories. An image fills his thoughts: it is of the moment he first received this very lightsaber as a Jedi padawan and Obi-Wan smiling down at him, proud of his new apprentice. More memories flicker through his mind like he is going through a roll of film—repairing his saber with Obi-Wan after it was damaged in the Geonosian droid factory, Anakin and Ahsoka fighting alongside one another in the Clone Wars, training with his old master, slaughtering a village of sandpeople.

His mind begins to spin. It could just be a coincidence; after all, the boy is being trained by Obi-Wan, who took his lightsaber on Mustafar all those years ago. But then Vader recalls what Padmé said on the Death Star—that Obi-Wan told her that he killed Anakin Skywalker.

Luke had said the same thing, that Vader killed his father.

He isn't ready to take the leap that this boy is his son, but he decides to keep the possibility in mind. Besides, Vader doesn't want to get his hopes up... and he doesn't want to believe that Padmé lied to him, again.

"Wait... this lightsaber..." Vader says. "I know this weapon. It once belonged to—"

But before Vader can say anything more, the foot of an imperial walker crashes through the roof.

"Han! *Be careful!*" shouts Padmé. "Luke is down there, and I swear if he dies because of —"

"I got it, I got it!" Han replies. He then speaks into the microphone of the walker so that Luke can hear him. "Watch out, kid! This thing handles like a bantha."

"Or maybe you're just a bad driver," grumbles Leia with a roll of her eyes.

But Han ignores that comment. "I'm clearing us a path outta here, Luke. Don't worry, we've got everything under control," he tells Luke, who is scrambling on the ground.

Padmé's eyes widen when she catches sight of Vader, his lightsaber ignited and glowing bright red. Once she sees that he is moving toward Luke, panic sets in. What if he kills their son? He has no idea about Luke—Padmé only gave him the name and said that he died.

And then, in that moment, she realizes that she has made a grave mistake.

The name. She didn't think that Luke would be around Vader so soon. Padmé knew that eventually, Luke would find out, but for now, it is best to keep him in the dark so it wouldn't interfere with his Jedi training. If someone said Luke's name in front of Vader, surely, he would know that Padmé lied to him about the death of their child, and it would not be long before he confronted Luke about it.

She has to help Luke—she can't stay up in the walker and just *watch* everything unfold. Especially not if Luke's life was in *Vader's* hands. The walker won't stand a chance against Vader, and they might end up hurting Luke in the process. No, she has to find another way.

Padmé peers through the windshield of the walker and spies a row of speeders not too far away from Luke. That was it—bringing Luke into walker wouldn’t be quick enough, and the walker is too slow to evade Darth Vader. But the speeders are fast, and they would be easy to get into, unlike the walker.

She would be leaving Leia and Han undefended, but Luke is in more immediate danger.

“Leia, I’m going to go help Luke,” she tells her daughter. “Don’t risk firing in Luke’s general area—even if Vader is there.”

As Padmé opens the hatch, Leia says in a concerned tone, “I know I can’t talk you out of it, so just be *careful* out there.” Leia pauses as Padmé uncoils cables from her belt. “We’ll be alright without you, though.”

She gives her daughter a small smile. “I’m sure you will be.”

And with that, Padmé attaches a grappling hook to the opening of the hatch and descends into a developing warzone. Her blaster is firmly held in her hand, but only a few Stormtroopers have arrived to the scene.

She almost hesitates when she sees the looming, dark form of Vader. His back is turned to her, but he must know that she is near. Padmé carefully moves along the wall out of his sight—for now, he is focused on Luke, but she knows that she will eventually be spotted. And what then? Padmé doesn’t have time to think of an answer, because Leia has already thought of a solution.

Before Vader gets too close to Luke, shots fire from the imperial walker, and Padmé looks back at it and scowls. She told them *not* to do this—not only were they putting themselves in danger, but her and Luke, too. Admittedly, Padmé is more worried about Vader than herself; the blaster fire doesn’t come anywhere near her or her son, but instead is focused on her husband. While she is confident that he can handle himself, she still dislikes the fact that he is being attacked, especially by his own daughter.

For a moment, she thinks that he glances at her, but then his attention is forced back onto the lasers firing at him nonstop.

“Leia, I told you *not* to fire!” she says into her earpiece.

But Leia does not reply, so Padmé just keeps running at full speed, knowing that her daughter will not cease fire. Her only solace is that blasts from a walker probably would not kill Vader. But luckily, the attack from the walker distracts Vader long enough for Padmé to reach her son. As the Sith Lord deflects the blaster fire with the Force, sending some of them back to the imperial walker, Padmé and Luke are able to reach the row of speeders.

Luke hops onto one of them first, and beckons for Padmé to come with him. She swings her leg over Luke’s speeder and latches onto him with her arms.

But just as Luke powers on the speeder, a group of Stormtroopers come rushing through the entrance and focus their firepower on the imperial walker.

A pang of anxiety shoots through Padmé’s chest. “Luke!” she says in a low voice. “We’ve got to distract them!”

She will *not* let her daughter die. As long as she is still breathing, Padmé will never allow for that to happen.

Luke nods and turns the speeder around. In a matter of seconds, Luke and Padmé fly through the hallway, clearing Stormtroopers from their path with the cannons of the speeder.

As they exit the room, Padmé hears the harsh voice of Darth Vader growl, “Hold your fire, but go after them and bring them back to me alive. *I* will handle the walker.”

Even as they speed away, Padmé can feel the weight of his gaze on her back.

Leia is almost relieved as the Stormtroopers chase after Luke and Padmé on speeders of their own, but it quickly is replaced by a wave of panic.

“Nice knowing ya, Darth,” Han says smugly, but the smirk on his face is wiped away almost immediately.

Han tries to step on Vader with the walker, but the two rebels find that the foot of the walker refuses to come down, almost as if it is being held in the air by an invisible force.

“Wait... why aren’t we *moving*?” asks Han. “What’s...”

They both peer down through the windows of the walker to see that Vader is holding the walker up by its foot—with the *Force*.

“*You gotta be kidding me,*” Han says in disbelief.

Suddenly, wires and machinery inside of the walker begin to snap and crumple. Blue sparks of electricity flare from the broken wires that now hang from the ripped ceiling panels, and Leia realizes with a sinking feeling that Vader is literally ripping the walker apart from the inside.

“He’s using the Force!” Leia exclaims.

“That’s not possible,” argues Han.

But Leia knows that he is wrong. If she weren’t so panicked, she would have snapped at him for his constant ignorance towards the Force. “He’s going to tear this thing apart!” she goes on.

“That’s not possible!” Han repeats. “There’s no such thing as the Force!”

“Tell that to Vader!” snaps Leia, her irritation suddenly spiking as her fear intensifies.

She can’t die—not like *this*. Not to *Vader*.

Han opens his mouth to say something, but then he stops when he sees something in the window. When Leia follows his gaze, she sees Luke and Padmé on a speeder zooming towards Vader. The moment the Dark Lord sees them, he releases the walker from his iron grip.

“Get out of there, *now!*” Padmé’s voice says through Leia’s commlink.

“She doesn’t have to tell me twice,” remarks Han. “You got grappling hooks, Princess?”

Leia gives him a nod. "Let's hurry," she says. "We don't have much time."

Artoo beeps at them in a way that Leia can only determine as anxious.

As Leia, Han, and Artoo escape the walker, she sees Luke and Padmé begin to speed through one of the exits. But then suddenly, stopped mid-air, almost as if something is holding them back. Luke tries to accelerate, but to avail.

Now on the ground, Leia stops dead in her tracks. She has to do something, or Luke and her mother will be caught.

"Is Vader doing that?" exclaims Han, once again disbelieving in the power of the Force.

"Of course he is," she almost hisses, her nerves getting the best of her.

And then she sees the one thing that could save her family: Luke's lightsaber, half-covered in the rubble. Leia reaches out with the Force and calls it to her hand, and with a little bit of extra willpower, she is able to bring it into her hand.

She ignites it, and says, "Han, Artoo, get out of here."

"What? There's no way we're just gonna leave you, Your Highness," Han tries to argue.

While Leia appreciates his concern, this is no time for a debate. "Now," she tells him, more urgently this time.

It is only when Darth Vader releases his grip on Luke and Padmé's speeder and turns to face Leia that Han heeds her words. He and Artoo begin to dart away, but then Vader moves to stop them.

"It's not them you should be worried about," Leia says, her words emboldened by the fire slowly rising within her. She hasn't been face to face with Vader in many weeks, and now that she is looking into his eyes, or rather, his mask, her rage begins to flare.

This is the man who tore the galaxy apart. This is the man who watched and held her back as her planet was destroyed. *This* is the man who tortured her relentlessly for hours and hours until her mind was so scrambled she could hardly think straight.

Leia's taunt works; Vader turns back to her, his anger inflamed. She can *feel* it, like a dark fire blazing through the ruined factory.

"You, like the boy, are a fool to engage me," Vader almost chides.

She lets out a furious cry and lunges at the Dark Lord, but his easily deflects her attack. As she and Vader are caught in a saber lock, Han reaches a speeder, to her relief.

"Leia, don't!" Padmé shouts, but Leia refuses to relent.

"Just go!" she replies, but she keeps her eyes trained on Vader. "Don't wait for me!"

Vader moves backward, as if he wants to break their saber lock, but Leia only steps forward in return, holding his attention long enough for her companions to escape. They take off, Artoo trailing behind them with his rockets.

"Since when did the *Princess* become a *Jedi*?" Vader taunts her. "Is Obi-Wan training you as well?"

“What do you care?” she snarls. Their sabers break apart, but Leia is quick to slash at him again. Vader takes a defensive position in battle rather than offensive, blocking her attacks rather than launching his own. She wonders if he is testing her; why isn’t he trying to kill her yet?

Red and blue lightsabers hiss against one another as they meet once more, producing green flashes of light that flash and glare in Leia’s vision.

“I’ll take that as a yes, then,” he responds. “He hasn’t taught you well, clearly. You have far too much anger for a Jedi.”

“How could I possibly not hate you?” An inferno has unleashed within her; she has lost control and she knows it, but Leia cannot help it. Her rage demands to be felt, fueled by the agony of the loss of her planet and the haunting memories of Vader’s tireless torture.

“You tortured me on the Death Star, you destroyed the Jedi Order!” Her blade comes down on him once more, but he just blocks her again, as if her attacks are nothing. “You *watched* as my planet was blasted to smithereens!”

“Jedi do not seek revenge,” Vader says. His tone, though distorted by his mask, almost sounds amused, which only pushes Leia over the edge even more. “You’re using your anger right now, aren’t you? You’re letting it fuel you. You’re drawing on the *Dark Side*.”

Leia hesitates. No, that can’t be true. Just because she hates Vader doesn’t mean that she is using the Dark Side to fight him. No. She isn’t like him. She is not a Sith.

“You’re wrong,” she snarls. “I’m not like *you*.”

“No, you are not,” he agrees. “*You are weak*.”

He must be trying to antagonize her, and it’s working. It’s working all too well, and though Leia tries to calm herself like Obi-Wan taught her, she cannot find the focus to do so.

So instead, Leia’s anger consumes her. She lunges at Vader, her lightsaber crashing into his over and over again, only for him to block her every single time. Even when she thinks she has found an opening, he still deflects her.

“Your techniques are *painfully* amateur,” Vader tells her, as if he is very bored.

By now, she knows that she can’t win this fight. Vader should have killed her at this point; going into this, she knew she might be sacrificing herself for her companions. At least they will get away, and this factory will be destroyed. As she and Vader fight, they are hopefully safely on their way to the *Millennium Falcon*.

As they break apart, Leia spins around and runs from Vader, keeping her lightsaber ignited and at her side. Vader trails behind her, but he is not running. Because Leia is barely even five feet tall and Darth Vader is well over six feet, he only has to walk, at an albeit quick pace, to stay behind her.

Eventually, Leia reaches a staircase and quickly climbs it, taking two steps at a time. It aggravates her to know that Vader is *walking* to keep up with her, but no matter how much she tries to go faster, it seems to be to no avail.

It almost feels like he is playing with her, but why? Is he trying to buy time? Is he just putting her to a test?

Once they have climbed the stairs, they find themselves on a flat rooftop of the factory.

Leia turns to face him, she snarls, "What are you playing at, Vader?"

"Are you complaining that you are still alive?" he asks. "Because I can easily remedy that."

She scowls at him and launches herself into battle once more, only to find that her efforts are still fruitless. Her father's saber collides with Vader's again and again, but to no avail. She feels so *useless*.

"Enough games," he growls. In one swift movement, Vader kicks her in the stomach, sending her slamming onto the rooftop. A jolt of pain shoots through her back, but just as Leia is about to get up, Darth Vader raises his hand and lifts her from the rooftop with the Force.

As she tries to move and use her saber, she ends up sheathing it instead, and it falls out of her hand in her panic. An invisible hand has closed around her throat, blocking her airways. Leia gasps desperately for air and claws at her neck, but her lungs only continue to burn with the lack of oxygen.

"Tell me about the boy, the rebel pilot who destroyed the Death Star," Vader demands. "And *perhaps* I will let you live."

"L—liar..." Leia just barely gets out, her voice hoarse and quiet.

"He is your companion—the young blond one," he specifies. "And your training partner, I presume. Tell me everything you know, *now*."

"Leia, where are you? We've fought off the scavengers and we're in *Falcon*," she hears Padmé's voice over the commlink in her ear.

She responds with only a very choked gurgle and, "L... leave..." her words are barely understandable, but Vader must know what she said, because his grip around her neck only tightens.

Leia doubts that her companions would leave her behind, even though she has urged them to go, and if they stayed too long, they might be caught in the factory explosion.

"What's happening? *Leia!*" her mother's voice is more frantic now, but Leia is unable to respond.

The Dark Lord suddenly releases her, and she hits the ground hard. The impact would have knocked the air out of her lungs if he hadn't already choked it out of her. Leia desperately gasps, her lungs burning with excruciating pain as she inhales deeply, unable to breathe in enough air to fulfill her lungs' needs.

Leia tries to stand, but her legs falter.

"*Tell me!*" Darth Vader nearly roars, his patience completely lost now.

Though her voice is weak, she musters enough strength to talk. “I’ll never tell you anything, Vader!” she is sure to mention his name so that her companions know that he is near. “We’re both going to die on this rooftop in a few minutes, and your Empire will be even more crippled!”

“Leia we’re coming to get you right now,” she hears Luke through the communicator.

“Hang in there, Princess,” Han chimes in.

She isn’t sure if she can hang in there, but she doesn’t say anything more. If they are going to rescue her, they must keep the element of surprise.

“I’m running out of patience,” Vader tells her. “Though I suppose taking you hostage could be useful. I’m sure your companions would easily be lured into the Empire’s grasp if we had you in custody.”

Leia would rather die than be taken captive by Darth Vader; she doesn’t think she could endure being tortured again, and Padmé and Luke would never just let her go. Vader is right to assume that she would be easy bait to lure them in.

Finally, she finds the strength to stand. Leia beckons her father’s lightsaber into her hand with the Force, but she doesn’t intend to use it. Instead, she begins backing away from Vader towards the edge of the rooftop, feigning acceptance of her defeat.

“You’ll never break any of us, even if you did capture us all,” snaps Leia, refusing to allow her courage to crumble under the immense pressure and fear that is coming down on her. “We would never tell you anything.”

“That is fine. I only require information from you at the moment,” Vader deadpans.

“So you want to capture my friends, just so you can kill them?”

“No,” he replies simply.

His words make the gears of her mind turn. On the Death Star, he wanted information from her... but not from Padmé. *Never* from Padmé. In fact, he had even asked her about her mother before interrogating her about the rebel base. Padmé told her that he wanted her cooperation... but couldn’t he just hire some diplomat to appeal to rebelling systems? Why did he need Padmé, specifically?

And on Yavin IV, it did not seem as if Padmé was in danger of dying by Darth Vader’s hand. His lightsaber was sheathed, and when they arrived in their ship, it seemed as if they were simply *talking*. About what, she doesn’t know.

She doesn’t want to distrust her mother, the woman who raised her after Breha died, but she can’t help but be skeptical sometimes. Vader is not known for his mercy, so why would he extend it to Padmé, not once, but *twice*?

Leia doesn’t know what Vader would want with them, especially Padmé. Maybe he would want to train Luke, but Leia doubted she would be included in that. He probably hates her too much to want to make her his Sith apprentice.

“Then what do you want?” she inquires, her tone full of hatred.

"I do not feel the need to reveal my intentions to the likes of you, Your Highness." His voice is just as venomous as Leia's.

She slowly inches closer and closer towards the edge of the rooftop, and but Vader continues to close the distance between them so that they are not standing too far apart.

"Let's try this one more time," he presses. "What do you know about the rebel pilot?"

Leia hears a humming noise, like a hovering ship. It seems to be coming from underneath her, though it is slightly muddled by the continuous drone of Vader's lightsaber and the rasp of his respirator. She does not dare look down, as Vader would be quick to stop her from escaping.

She will have to take a leap of faith—literally—and hope that she lands on top of the *Falcon* and makes it to the hatch on its roof. And if she's wrong, well...

Her heels are right on the edge of the rooftop now, and she shoots Vader a glare. "Nothing I'd ever tell *you*."

And with that, Leia suddenly jumps off of the roof, and her immense relief, the *Falcon* is waiting for her with the hatch open. Her body slams against it, but her body hardly registers the shock, as she is already scrambling into the hatch. It is Padmé who helps pull her safely into ship, wrapping her arms around her daughter protectively.

As soon as Padmé says, "Han, go! I got Leia!" the *Millennium Falcon* blasts into the sky, far away from Vader and the factory.

At first, as Leia settles in, she feels only triumph. But it is shattered as Han circles around and the factory comes into view. The factory—which should have been blown up by now.

Her, Padmé, Han, Luke, and Chewie are all in the cockpit, and their expressions immediately morph into mixtures of shock and disbelief at what they are seeing.

"No," says Leia. "*No!* All of this was for *nothing!* That's why Vader wasn't alarmed at all! He knew the factory wouldn't blow up! They have—ugh! They must have stopped the power core meltdown!"

Padmé rests a comforting hand on her shoulder and sighs. "I know, I know, Leia," she tells her daughter softly. "I wish we could have been successful."

"Well, this is just great, ain't it?" Han remarks with a shake of his head. Chewie says something in response, but Leia can't understand.

"We'll get them another time," Luke says optimistically, but Leia can hear the falter in his otherwise upbeat tone.

After taking such a beating from Vader, not only is she physically worn out from being slammed against a hard surface twice and almost choked to death, but her pride is also deeply wounded. She didn't stand a chance against him. If she is going to kill him someday, she will have to become more powerful.

Before departing from Cymoon-1, Vader choked one of the Imperial officers to death for failing to capture the rebels. How could they be so incompetent? If they hadn't reached the *Falcon*, he would have all of them right now. He would have Padmé, and the boy who is possibly his son. If only his wife were with him, she would be able to confirm his suspicions about the rebel pilot.

Officer Aggadeen would live today, however. He had stopped the power core meltdown and saved Lord Vader from a further embarrassment; if the Emperor found out he had failed to stop the explosion of a major weapon factory, he would have Vader's head.

Vader now sits in his shuttle, his fists clenched at his sides as his anger overtakes him.

Although the factory had been saved, nothing could quell Vader's uncontrollable rage as he watched the Millennium Falcon soar through the sky and into space, far, far away from Cymoon-1 and from him. Once again, Padmé had eluded him. She always chose the rebels over him, and it infuriated him to no end.

On that rooftop, he vowed that he will destroy the Alliance and his former master. Even if the boy is not his son, he has decided that he will take him as his apprentice. Both he and the Princess of Alderaan are equally powerful in the Force, but he doubts he will be able to turn Leia Organa over to his side. She is too bold, too stuck in her rebellious ways to become an Imperial. She may draw from the Dark Side, but that does not mean she will ever pledge herself to the Empire. And with power like hers, she would be too dangerous to be kept alive.

So, he will kill her instead and train only the boy. And in doing so, he will take Obi-Wan's hope and crush it with one hand.

chapter xiii: skywalker.

A/N: So there is a new OC in this chapter named Abraxas Fallon, just a heads up. As listed in the cast, he is portrayed by Matthew Daddario. Also, Dr. Aphra from the comics is also in this chapter; don't worry if you know nothing about her! Everything will eventually be explained.

Though the Emperor was pleased that Vader was able to stop the arms factory on Cymoon-1 from being destroyed, his master was disappointed that he failed to bring in the rebels. He was not punished for it, however, since overall, Vader was successful.

He has enough on his plate already; the last thing he needs is the Emperor punishing him for his failures.

The only order the Emperor gave him before ending their holocall was to find the rebels and bring them to justice. Vader, of course, purposely neglected to tell his master that the rebel pilot and the Organa Princess were being trained by Obi-Wan Kenobi... in fact, Palpatine doesn't even know that Skywalker's master still lives.

If the two Jedi trainees were revealed to the Emperor, he might get in the way of Vader's plans, and he can't have that. The boy would be *his* weapon, and he wants the Princess to die by his own hand.

But Vader, being the busy man that he is, knows that he will need help if he is to bring the rebels in. He cannot dedicate all of his time to finding them, so he has decided that he will find people who can.

A bounty hunter. That was the answer, that was what he needed.

And so that was what Lord Vader sought.

He arrives at Jabba's palace completely unannounced, shoving the Gamorrean guards aside with the Force to allow himself entry. Vader is in a hurry today; his time is limited. Not only does he have to track down a suitable bounty hunter, but there is another contact that he must find.

No one else tries to stop Vader as he marches into Jabba's throne room. Most of the creatures stiffened or backed away upon spotting Vader's formidable, dark figure, all of them knowing better than to try to stand in the way of the Dark Lord.

As expected, Jabba is furious that Vader would show up unannounced.

Jabba speaks angrily in Huttese, but Vader does not need the crime lord's protocol droid to translate for him. After all these years, he still remembers the language, and he still holds as much disdain for the Hutt Clan as he always has. Even when the droid speaks to communicate Jabba's words in Basic, Vader ignores it and only listens to what Jabba has to say.

"You have some nerve," drawls Jabba, *"coming here uninvited!"*

Vader is unfazed. He knows that Jabba can do nothing to kill or harm him, as Jabba wouldn't be so stupid to try to attack the Emperor's right hand.

"It would serve you well to remember that you do business with the Empire," Vader replies nonchalantly. Behind his mask, his eyes are narrowed with distaste. "And that *I* represent it."

In a frustrated, caustic tone, Jabba responds, "*I suppose so... but still—*"

"I am here on personal business," Vader replies nonchalantly. He couldn't care less about what the vile Hutt thought; he only cares about getting what he needs. "I require your best bounty hunter."

Jabba begins to laugh. It is truly an insufferable sound, and it makes Vader want to drain the life from him. He is still in a sour mood from the events on Cymoon-1, and he has no patience for this right now.

"*You'll have to pay double for disturbing me at such an early hour,*" the Hutt demands. "*It is only fair.*"

Vader scowls, the heat of rage surging within him at Jabba's insatiable greed. Of course, Vader does have the money to pay double, but he doesn't *want* to be so generous, especially not to Jabba. Most of the payment would go to the bounty hunter, but he knows that Jabba will get a substantial percentage of it.

He does not have time to bargain, so instead of arguing, he raises his hand and manipulates the Force to close Jabba's airways. The Hutt begins to gag and heave, and Vader hears the sound of blasters being drawn from the belts of Jabba's guests and employees. He does not react to it, but instead continues to hold Jabba in a Force choke until he agrees to a lower price for his bounty hunter.

Jabba holds up his hand as if to say, *Stop*, and Vader slowly releases him. The Hutt chokes and gargles, and then begins to gasp for breath. Vader is filled with satisfaction as he watches Jabba struggle to regain his pride and composure; he even almost smiles. Almost.

He lets out a weak laugh. "*You drive a hard bargain, Lord Vader,*" the Hutt tells him. Despite his laughter, Jabba's glare at Vader tells him that he is beyond displeased at the way the Sith Lord treated him.

"*Fett!*" Jabba calls, and a tall, masked man steps forward from the crowd. His gray-green armor is unmistakably Mandalorian, and he has a short cape that ripples behind him as he approaches Vader and Jabba.

He is Jango Fett's son, and if blood means anything, Boba Fett will be a more than adequate bounty hunter to serve Vader's purposes.

Boba is silent, awaiting Jabba's orders.

"*You will assist Lord Vader in...*" Jabba pauses, realizing Vader never specified what he needs a bounty hunter for. "*What is it that you need, Lord Vader?*"

"I would prefer to speak to Boba Fett in private," replies Vader. "There is much to be discussed. Matters that would not likely interest you." In other words, Vader doesn't want to have to stand near Jabba for much longer and he prefers privacy in matters like this.

With reluctance, Jabba points him to a room off to the side, down a narrow corridor. It is the designated negotiations room, as it is slightly less grimy than the rest of the palace and is windowed, but has curtains that can be drawn over them.

He and Boba Fett enter, and Vader immediately gets down to business.

“I need you to find someone for me,” he tells the bounty hunter. “A woman named Padmé Amidala.”

Boba nods and says, “I’ve seen the wanted notices for her. Rebel general, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Vader replies bitterly, though the sentiment is lost in the flatness of his vocalizer. His question has rubbed salt in an already festering wound. “If you can capture her rebel companions, I will pay you extra. But *she* is the priority.”

“I want her alive, and you may *not* harm her,” he is especially stern now. It is imperative that Boba Fett understands that; bounty hunters can be quite rough sometimes, but given the proper motivation, Vader is confident that Fett will follow through with his orders. “If I see even a *single* scratch or bruise on her, you will find yourself a *dead man* rather than a rich man.”

Boba pauses, as if he is contemplating something, and then replies, “I know better than to disobey someone of your rank, Lord Vader. I will find Amidala and bring her to you—unharm.”

Abraxas Fallon has been in the shadows for several months. He is an Imperial spy, but he took leave not too long ago once he learned that his family, who are also agents of the Empire, was taken hostage by the Rebel Alliance. They were all a part of the same team on a mission when they were captured and sent to Sunspot Prison, an Alliance jail that holds the most dangerous Imperials taken in by the rebels. Rather than be executed, because his mother and father were high-ranking agents, they are being held for ransom... which the Empire refused to pay.

When Abraxas learned that there would be no rescue mission or paying of the ransom, he asked to take an extended leave from his post as an Imperial spy, and since he had earned enough credit among his superiors, they agreed. Now that he has more leisure time, Abraxas has been spending his time with criminals trying to accumulate as many credits as possible to pay off the ransom.

He is now in route to Nar Shaddaa, the Smuggler’s Moon, where he and his companion, Doctor Chelli Lona Aphra, are going to cash in a bounty to Grakkus the Hutt. They had recently raided a droid factory and stolen several assassin droids for Grakkus to use in his beloved gladiatorial stadium.

Doctor Aphra is sitting in the pilot’s seat of her starship, the *Ark Angel*, while Abraxas reclines beside her, the back of his chair pushed back so that he is almost lying down.

“You’ve stayed like that the whole trip,” Aphra remarks. “Ever gonna get your ass up, Abra?”

Abraxas looks up at her and rolls his eyes. She's never had much a filter, but it's part of the reason he gets along with her. "I'm allowed to be lazy for *one* ride," he says.

Before Chelli can say anything more, the holocommunicator in Abraxas's pocket begins to beep.

Doctor Aphra cocks a curious eyebrow. "Who'd be calling you?" she inquires.

Abraxas shrugs. "I don't know," he replies. "But maybe I should take it in private."

"Just fill me in when you're done," Aphra tells him.

He gives her a nod before walking away and stepping into his living quarters, where he answers the holocall. To his immense shock, a hologram of *Darth Vader* materializes into the air. He almost flinches; what would Vader want with him now? They haven't spoken in several standard months, not to mention that Abraxas is on leave from his occupation in the Empire.

"*Lord Vader?*" he exclaims. "This is... a bit of a surprise. Do you need something from me?"

"I hope I am not disturbing you from whatever distraction you have found for yourself, Agent Fallon," Vader bites out in response.

Great, just my luck, Abraxas thinks. *Lord Vader's in a shit mood.*

Despite Vader's obvious irritation, Abraxas maintains his composure. He has learned to at least do that much during his many years serving the Empire. "No, not at all, my lord," Abraxas replies respectfully.

"Good," says Vader. "I need you to meet with me—*now*."

Right now? Abraxas almost scoffs. *I'm in the middle of something! Chelli is going to kill me.*

"Of course, my lord," Abraxas replies, despite his reluctance to comply with the Dark Lord. But he knows better than to deny Darth Vader. "Would you like me to come to you, or —"

"Where are you, currently, Agent Fallon?" Vader cuts him off.

"I'm just now arriving to Nar Shaddaa, my lord," he replies.

"I am not too far off on my Star Destroyer," says Vader. "I will send you my coordinates now. Meet me as quickly as you can."

Abraxas gives him a nod, and takes heed of the word 'quickly.' If he took too long, Vader would surely have his head. Whatever he needs, it seems very urgent.

"Oh, and Lord Vader," Abraxas adds before the transmission ends. "You should know, I'm not alone."

Deep in space on the Millennium Falcon, Padmé watches her daughter spar with Obi-Wan. She has the spirit of a warrior, like her father, but her fighting style is still very amateur. It clearly frustrates her; each time Obi-Wan beats her, she walks away with the fires of anger in her eyes and a rigidity in her body. Sometimes her fists clench at her sides.

Today, Leia's strikes at her master are more aggressive than Padmé has ever observed. She slashes at him ruthlessly, only to be blocked again and again, never able to gain the upper hand in battle.

The more she watches Leia in training, the more concerned Padmé becomes. She doesn't just have Anakin's fire; she has his hatred, too, and his aggression. But Padmé can't blame her; Leia has been hardened by the devastation of losing her home planet to the Empire, along with her father.

She pushes that thought out of her mind—ever since Bail's death, and especially now that she knows Anakin is alive, she tries not to think of Bail Organa at all.

After the spar is over and it is clear that Leia lost, she storms away to the other side of the ship, leaving Obi-Wan and Padmé alone.

Her old friend sighs. "You see what I see in her, don't you?" he asks.

Padmé nods. "But I don't think she would go to the dark side." Leia might have anger and hatred, but that didn't make her evil. She would never join the Empire that destroyed her home.

"We never thought that about Vader," says Obi-Wan.

"Just don't doubt her yet," Padmé replies coolly. "She's been through a lot recently. I don't know what happened between her and Vader on Cymoon-1, but I imagine it wasn't pleasant."

"I know," Obi-Wan told her. "But we must be cautious, still. Perhaps with more training, Leia will be able to let go of her anger."

"I'm sure she will," says Padmé. It may have been too optimistic, but she wanted to push any doubt for Leia out of Obi-Wan's mind. If she and Luke are going to defeat the Empire, Obi-Wan needs to trust them both.

"Maybe you should go talk to her," suggests Obi-Wan. "She may just need someone to confide in."

Padmé nods. She didn't want to approach the subject with Leia immediately because it was too fresh, but now it has been a few days since the events of Cymoon-1.

She rises from her seat on the sofa and follows Leia down the hallway to one of the viewports. Her daughter is standing completely still, hands clasped behind her back as she surveys the endless expanse of space.

"Leia?" Padmé says as she approaches. Her daughter turns her head, her long braid whipping across her shoulder as she does. "Are you alright?"

"No," she replies, now turned completely to face her mother. Her face is bitter, her eyes are cold.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Padmé is hoping that Leia will open up to her, but she isn’t too optimistic about that.

Leia lets out a sigh. “I’m just frustrated,” she tells Padmé. “I lost to Vader on Cymoon-1. He would have killed me if you hadn’t come to the rescue.”

Her heart convulses in her chest; seeing Leia so lost and knowing that it is because of her own father only makes guilt stab at her insides. Perhaps she should have told Anakin that Leia is his daughter, but it’s too late for that now. And if she had, he would try to turn her against the Rebel Alliance and over to the dark side. Padmé would *never* let that happen.

“You’re still new at being a Jedi,” Padmé tries to comfort her. “Vader was a Jedi for over a decade before becoming Sith. He’s spent nearly his whole life as a warrior.”

“I know,” replies Leia, but her tone has not softened at all. “It still makes me angry. I just want to beat him—I want revenge.”

Padmé stares at her for several moments, unsure of what to say. Revenge—she wants revenge. Just like Anakin wanted revenge against the sand people for killing his mother, just like he wanted revenge against the Jedi, and Bail, and Obi-Wan...

Leia adds, “I know it’s not the Jedi way. But... he *tortured* me on the Death Star. He made me watch Alderaan be destroyed. And then on Cymoon-1, I felt so powerless against him. It was so *easy* for him to hold me in a Force choke. There was *nothing* I could do.”

Again, Padmé is silent. All the light begins to drain out of her as she listens to Leia’s words, giving way to only the darkness of despair. Anakin tortured her—*he broke their deal*.

“He tortured you?” she says at last, almost breathless.

“I don’t know why that would surprise you,” Leia bites out. “It was the worst thing I’ve ever experienced. The pain wasn’t physical—not really. It was all a hallucination. I had to watch my mother—Breha—die over and over again. And when that didn’t get information out of me, he made me hallucinate that I was drowning.”

She is grateful that Leia stopped there, because Padmé couldn’t bear to listen to anymore of that. Anakin lied to her—she’s sure that he didn’t think he had broken his promise, but she had told him not to hurt Leia. But he did; he may not have made her bleed or bruised her skin, but he had hurt her mind and her soul.

I should have just told him the truth, she thinks to herself. *And this never would have happened*. Blame and guilt begins to grow heavier on Padmé’s shoulders.

“I’m so sorry, Leia,” Padmé lamented. “You have every right to be angry.”

“I don’t think Obi-Wan feels the same way.”

“He only wants what’s best for you. So do I,” says Padmé.

“Ben makes it seem so easy to let go of anger,” Leia continues, her eyes trained on the floor now. “But it’s not. I can’t just forget everything that Vader has done.”

Padmé places a gentle hand on her daughter’s shoulder. She wishes with all of her heart that things were not like this, but she understands Leia’s hatred of her father. Padmé knows

that she will never be able to bring herself to hate Anakin, but if she were Leia, perhaps she would.

"You just need time," she tries to soothe her daughter. "No one, not even Obi-Wan, can quell their anger in a blink of an eye."

Leia nods, but Padmé knows that she is still troubled. No amount of consolation can heal her wounds; only time could do that.

"Why aren't you excited?"

The voice of Doctor Aphra grates against Abraxas's eardrums. Though he cherishes his friend and partner in crime, she is quite the handful sometimes.

The two of them, plus Aphra's two droids, Triple Zero and Beete, have arrived on Darth Vader's Star Destroyer, the *Devastator*, and are now in an elevator that will take them to the upper levels. Since the moment Abraxas told Aphra that they would be meeting with Darth Vader, her whole face lit up with excitement.

"The *Darth Vader*! That's awesome!" she had exclaimed.

Abraxas can understand her admiration of the man, as he is skilled in combat and revered as the most feared person in the galaxy, but Vader is more than a legend to him. Once Abraxas had risen through the Imperial ranks, he was noticed by Vader for his numerous successes and for his tactics, and the two of them have worked together many times.

As the elevator comes to a stop, Abraxas shoots Doctor Aphra a look. "Just don't do anything, or say anything stupid," he warns her.

"No promises," Aphra chuckles. When Abraxas glares at her, she giggles and then adds, "But I'll try my best."

The door slides open, and they are greeted by a group of Stormtroopers that escort them to Vader, who is waiting for them on the bridge of the *Devastator*.

His back is turned at first, but then he faces them and walks towards them once he senses their presence. As he approaches, Abraxas swears he sees a glint of excitement in Aphra's eyes.

It has been a long time since he has been face-to-face with Darth Vader, and he has forgotten how staggering the man is, with his towering dark form and ominous aura. But Abraxas learned composure and respect in the Imperial Academy, and he has never forgotten it; he never allows any apprehension towards the Dark Lord to faze him.

"My lord, this is Doctor Aphra," Abraxas introduces his partner once Vader is standing before them. "And her two droids, Triple Zero and Beete."

The droids say nothing, but only because Abraxas made Chelli order them not to communicate at all while aboard the *Devastator*. Triple Zero could be extremely blunt, and Beete as well. The last thing Abraxas wanted was to be embarrassed for their behavior in front of his former superior.

“Hello, Lord Vader,” Aphra says with a warm smile. Abraxas is sure that Vader doesn’t care for pleasantries, though.

He only gives her a short nod and then regards Abraxas. “If your companions don’t mind, I would like for you to walk with me—alone,” Vader says.

Abraxas doesn’t look at Aphra, but he can almost *feel* her disappointment. “Of course, my lord,” he replies.

He breaks away from Aphra and her droids and leaves with Vader down the corridor, which is bustling with Stormtroopers and Imperial droids. Eventually, they turn a corner, and they are completely alone. Abraxas has never been comfortable being alone with Vader, even though he has been many times over the course of his career as an Imperial agent. He’s seen what happens to people who fail the Dark Lord; luckily, he has always been successful when Vader requested something of him.

“I have an assignment for you, Agent Fallon,” Vader begins.

“If I may ask, my Lord, why did you call on me specifically?” He is very curious as to what Vader wants—why couldn’t he ask a different agent to take on the mission?

“I am aware that you are on leave,” replies the Sith Lord. “But the assignment I have for you is very important.”

Abraxas knows that Vader favored him—if one could even call it that—before he took his leave from his job. Agent Fallon is known for being cunning and ruthless; he assumes that Vader likes that. Abraxas always gets the mission done, no matter the cost, no matter how much blood he has to stain his hands with.

He would have made a cocky remark, such as, “*So does that mean I’m your favorite agent?*” if it had been anyone else, but a comment like that around Lord Vader might get him killed.

Abraxas gave Vader a nod, signaling him to continue.

“And... if you are successful, I will have the ransom on your family paid.”

Abraxas’s heart freezes in his chest, and his head snaps up. He is unable to find the words to say—he is too shocked to speak. He knows that Vader is not doing this out of generosity or the kindness of his heart; no, Vader is dead-set on finding or having something and he knows that holding Abraxas’s family over his head is the perfect motivator.

In that moment, Abraxas decides that whatever the mission, he will accept it, and he *will* be successful.

“There are multiple tasks, but this is the first,” Vader tells him. “I need you to find information on the rebel pilot who destroyed the Death Star. He is a human who originates from Tatooine. I have a possible first name as well, but it is not confirmed: *Luke*.”

“Yes, my lord,” Abraxas replies. It isn’t much to go off of, but Abraxas has begun searches with less intel before.

“I have a description on him as well,” Darth Vader continues. “Blond, with blue eyes, and young. Perhaps... in his late teens.”

“What about his ship?” inquires Abraxas. If the boy is a pilot, surely there is a ship that Abraxas could track him by. “And does he have companions?”

“He travels with a group of rebels in a ship called the *Millennium Falcon*. His comrades are a smuggler by the name of Han Solo, two rebel generals named Padmé Amidala and Leia Organa, a Wookiee, two droids, and a Jedi Master named Obi-Wan Kenobi,” replies Vader. “The *Millennium Falcon* is YT-1300 Corellian light freighter. It was last seen on Cymoon-1, but the first sighting was at Mos Eisley on Tatooine.”

Abraxas nods, taking mental note of all of this. “Then the boy might live somewhere near Mos Eisley,” he speculates. “And, my lord, what would you like me to find out about him?”

“Anything you can,” Vader tells him. “But most importantly, I want his full name and exactly where on Tatooine he comes from.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Abraxas and his comrades have arrived at Mos Eisley, and are now questioning the locals about the rebel pilot. So far, they are empty handed, but Abraxas has not given up yet.

He and Aphra walk into one of the bars, where a trio of musicians are playing while the customers chat amongst themselves as they drink. Tatooine was one of his least favorite planets, but it was comfortably familiar—there were criminals and smugglers everywhere. Those are Abraxas’s kinds of people; they are survivors, like him.

Abraxas approaches the bartender, but he has intentions of ordering a drink tonight. “Got any time to spare?” he asks him.

“Depends on what you need,” the bartender replies.

“I just have a few questions,” says Abraxas. “You ever seen a young boy around here? Blond hair, blue eyes? Maybe with a captain, a Wookiee, some droids, and a guy in some robes?”

“Not sure,” the bartender tells him. “But maybe I’d remember for the right price.”

Abraxas raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, buddy, I really don’t have time for that,” he says with a roll of his eyes. And then suddenly, Abraxas throws a punch at the bartender; his fist collides with his jaw, sending him smacking into the floor.

Doctor Aphra lets out a laugh. “Nice one, Abra,” she remarks.

Abraxas shrugs. “It was nothing,” he replies.

Everyone in the bar stops what they were doing; even the music halts. Some of the employees point their blasters at Abraxas and Aphra, but then Aphra pulls out something orb-shaped from her belt.

A grenade.

Abraxas smirks; Aphra always has something up her sleeve.

“Not so fast,” she warns them. “Or this place will blow.”

Some gasps fill the bar, but most people just remain completely silent and still. Luckily, no one moves to fire at Abraxas or Aphra.

The bartender slowly rises to his feet, wiping blood off his lip as he does. “Um,” he stammers. “What did—what did you need again?”

“I’m looking for a boy who would have been here weeks ago,” says Abraxas. “As I said before—blond, blue eyes, and he was with several companions: a pilot, an old man in robes, two droids, a Wookiee, and possibly two women as well.”

But when Abraxas is met with only silence, he presses even more.

“Does the name Luke ring a bell?” he asks the bartender.

“There was someone here like that but—I don’t know anything about him, I swear!” the bartender replies, panic setting into his features.

Abraxas ponders for a moment, but his intuition tells him that the bartender will be useless in finding what he needs. But that didn’t mean that everyone in this bar would be another dead end.

“Someone here knows something,” Abraxas growls in response.

And then, as if on cue, he hears footsteps running for the door. Abraxas whips around to see that a young, dark-haired boy is sprinting towards the exit. Before he can get away, Abraxas shoots him in the leg with a blaster, impairing him from running any further. The boy falls to the ground, half of his body sticking out the door.

Abraxas and Aphra approach him and drag him outside into the sand.

He tries to get up, but Abraxas holds him down by pressing his boot against his chest.

“I don’t know anything, I swear!” cries the boy.

“Yeah?” Abraxas almost chuckles at his sheer stupidity. “Then why were you running?”

“Come on, kid,” says Aphra. “Just tell us what you know, and you live—simple as that.”

The boy seems to consider his options for a moment, but then when Abraxas’s shoe digs into his chest again, he answers. “Okay! Okay! I know who you’re looking for!”

“I want his name, and where he used to live,” Abraxas demands.

“His name is—” the boy struggles to speak for a moment, but then he finds his words. “Luke Skywalker. He grew up here, he was raised with the Lars family, his aunt and uncle. They were moisture farmers that lived—not too far from here, and Valley of the Spirits. That’s all I know, I swear!”

Abraxas nods, satisfied with his answer; he has a gut feeling that the boy is telling the truth. Now all that was left to do was find the Lars’ residence and report back to Darth Vader.

He removes his boot from the young boy’s chest. “Now get the hell out of here,” Abraxas tells him. “Before I change my mind about letting you live.”

The boy doesn’t hesitate to flee—in a matter of seconds, he disappears around a corner.

“Well, that was fun,” remarks Aphra. “The look on his face was *priceless*.”

Abraxas chuckles; he never intended to kill the boy, but it was still a thrill to make him *think* that he was on the brink of death.

Darth Vader awaits the much-anticipated arrival of Agent Fallon on the Devastator. He is standing at his private viewport, looking out into the stars and at the Imperial ships that drift through space.

Abraxas Fallon contacted him hours ago, informing him that he has the information that Vader requested. He was more than pleased at that news; he knew he could count on Agent Fallon to be successful. Agent Fallon is one of the most gifted agents of his time, which Vader suspects has to do with his Force sensitivity.

But even so, Vader couldn’t help but allow the anxiety that surrounds Agent Fallon’s findings to take over.

His heart has been pounding ever since he received the call from Agent Fallon. If this rebel pilot is his son, it will change *everything*.

Suddenly, the doors slide open, and Darth Vader’s entire body—or what’s left of it—goes rigid.

He hears a pair of footsteps and knows that Abraxas must have brought the doctor with him.

“My lord,” Abraxas greets him. “I have what you requested.”

“Very good, Agent Fallon,” replies Vader. He is glad that his vocalizer flattens almost all emotion from his voice; otherwise, he may sound very anxious right now. Abraxas, however, may be able to feel that through the Force, whether he is aware of it or not.

“I couldn’t have done it without Doctor Aphra, however,” Abraxas continues. “She was instrumental in obtaining the information.”

Aphra remains silent, but Vader can feel the swell of her satisfaction.

Vader nods and turns his head slightly to Abraxas, but not the rest of his body. “Tell me what you found, Agent Fallon.”

“He was a moisture farmer who lived with his aunt and uncle, the Lars,” says Abraxas.

His aunt and uncle, Vader repeats in his mind. *The Lars*.

That almost completely confirms that the rebel pilot is his son, but he decides to reign in his conclusions and allow Agent Fallon to continue. Vader turns back to the viewport so that he doesn’t have to look at Agent Fallon while he gives his report, out of fear that it may rattle him too much.

“I sent you a visual of the area as well,” Agent Fallon continues. “And I have his name, too.”

Vader holds his breath as he waits for Agent Fallon to say it, to say the one thing that will confirm the rebel pilot's true identity. He feels a sharp pang of anxiety and—dread?—in his stomach as Agent Fallon begins to speak.

"Skywalker."

Lord Vader's fists immediately clench at his side and something within him twists violently. His mind flickers to Padmé on the Death Star when she told him that their son was a stillborn. But she had lied to him, *again*. *She always lied.*

But then his mind is filled with a new image: himself as a young Jedi, holding Padmé in his arms after returning from the mission to rescue the Chancellor from General Grievous. She had been trembling in that moment, her eyes wide with apprehension.

"Something wonderful has happened," she had said to him. *"Ani, I'm pregnant."*

His train of thought is shattered by the sound of Agent Fallon's voice—Vader is almost glad for it. Those memories always twist a knife into his heart, even now that he knows Padmé is alive.

"Luke Skywalker," Agent Fallon clarifies.

He exhales deeply, trying to compose himself. Vader desperately needs solitude; he can feel his emotions broiling within him and he knows that it's only a matter of time before it all spills over.

"That will be all, Agent Fallon," Vader says coolly. "Good work. I will contact you soon with your next mission."

"Yes, my lord," Fallon replies. He and Doctor Aphra exit the room, and the moment they do, Vader lets everything that he was holding inside loose.

A crack shoots down the window of the viewport as Vader's fists begin to shake.

Padmé lied to him, and so did his master. Vader has not forgotten that the Emperor lied to him about the deaths of his wife and her unborn child—he made him think that he had lost everything. He told him that *he* was responsible for their deaths.

And *Padmé*—she must be so certain that Vader would harm their child, otherwise, she wouldn't have kept him a secret. Obi-Wan has twisted her, turned her against him, and now he must be doing the same to *Vader's son*. He won't allow it to go on any longer; no, he would have his family with him, and he would destroy Obi-Wan for breaking them apart.

"Skywalker," he says to himself. The moment he says that name, the window is only filled with more jagged cracks, forming the shape of a spider web in the center of the viewport.

"I have a son," Vader continues.

He stares out the cracked window at the Imperial ships, the same vision he had earlier forming in his mind. Himself, his wife, and *their son*, all standing together before the Imperial throne.

"He will be mine. It will *all* be mine."

chapter xiv: the bounty hunter.

While Luke and Leia train with Obi-Wan, Padmé and Han are embarking on a mission for the Rebel Alliance.

“You still think it’s a good idea to go to Nar Shaddaa?”

Han nods, but Padmé is almost certain that she caught a glimpse of wariness in his eyes. As much as he feigns confidence, she knows that he must be at least a little scared to cross into territory where he’s fair game for bounty hunters. Jabba still has a price on his head, and the Empire now, too, and if they’re not careful, they might be recognized on Nar Shaddaa. Not to mention that Padmé is now listed as a priority criminal by the Empire.

It is a risky mission; they both knew that going into it. But Han swears that the best slicer in the galaxy, known as Vargas, lives on Nar Shaddaa, and if they are going to hit the Empire hard, they’ll need him. Padmé has a particular mission in mind, but the final details rely on whether they can recruit the slicer or not.

“It’s not like we’ll be showing our faces,” Han tries to assure her.

They both have masks in their ship to complete their disguises. Each of them is wearing armored suits to mimic the appearance of bounty hunters; they would fit right in on Nar Shaddaa.

Before they make their stop on Nar Shaddaa, Han and Padmé stop at a station just outside of the planet to refuel. It is surely crawling with all kinds of scum, so as they land, Padmé and Han put their masks on.

But as they exit their ship—it was a simple shuttle, as they had left the *Millennium Falcon* behind—Padmé notices that there are security guards awaiting them.

She didn’t expect that there would be a checkpoint; most fueling stations don’t have them at all. But they must have had a robbery or some other crime committed here, otherwise, security wouldn’t be tight. She feels a nervous pang in her stomach as she approached the security guard, knowing that he will probably ask them to remove their masks.

Han seems completely calm as he approaches the officer, who, just as Padmé predicted, says, “Remove your masks, please.”

Despite Padmé’s reluctance, she complies, and so does Han. Once the security guards see their faces, they say, “Alright, move along then.” They don’t seem to recognize them, and if they do, they don’t care who they are. All they seem to be concerned about is that Han and Padmé are not the people they are looking for.

But someone else is looking for them, and as Padmé puts her mask back on, she does not notice the man who is peering at her from around the corner.

“How much fuel do we need to make the hyperspace jump to Nar Shaddaa?” Padmé asks Han. As they walk deeper into the station, they still do not notice the armored man who is

listening in on their conversation.

“Not too much,” says Han. “You’re not nervous, are you?”

“Well, yes, we’re going to a town full of criminals,” Padmé replies.

“Hutta Town is rough, but it’ll be worth the journey, promise.”

Padmé isn’t entirely sure of that, but she supposes she will find out if they successfully recruit the slicer.

After refueling, Padmé and Han continued to fly towards Nar Shaddaa. A quick jump through hyperspace was all they needed to reach the planet. It was not long before they were landing in some run-down part of one of the major cities, the name of which Padmé did not care to remember.

The ramp lowers, but just as Padmé and Han walk onto the platform, they see that there is a group of people waiting for them. In the front of the group, there is a man wearing green armor with a short cape draped on his shoulder. Padmé stops dead in her tracks and instinctively draws her blaster, but Han hesitates.

Their identities are exposed; their masks are in their hands. They had not yet placed them over their heads—they weren’t planning on meeting anyone at the landing platform.

“That’s Boba Fett,” he whispers to her. “Jabba’s bounty hunter.”

Padmé’s face turns pale. So, Jabba has sent someone to collect Han—and now he might be cashing in double if he caught Padmé, too. Surely, if he is a bounty hunter, he would know that the Empire is looking for her.

“You’re outnumbered,” Boba Fett says. “I would think twice before opening fire.”

“If this is about Jabba—” begins Han.

“It wasn’t, at first, *Solo*,” Fett cuts him off. “But then I was alerted by one of my crew members that Padmé Amidala was spotted at a fueling station—with *you*.”

There is a pause; Padmé’s hand is on her blaster, but she knows that if she draws it, Fett and his crew would immediately open fire—and she doubted that it would be directed at her. If Boba Fett has come here for her, then he is likely doing so because of the bounty on her head, which stated that she was wanted unharmed.

Han, on the other hand...

“If you’re here for me, then just let Han go and I’ll come with you willingly,” Padmé tries to reason. She isn’t sure if she entirely means that, but it could at least buy them time.

At least if Padmé was captured, she wouldn’t be harmed.

“Why cash in on one bounty when I can easily get two?” Boba Fett replies, crossing his arms. He then says to his crew, “Take them.”

Without hesitation, Padmé drops her helmet on the ground and draws her blaster. She fires at one of Fett's crew members, shooting him in the head. He drops to the ground instantly, but Padmé looks away, not wanting to see what she has done. She doesn't like killing, but in times like these, it is necessary.

She misses the days when most of her opponents were just droids rather than actual people.

Just as she is about to turn and run for their ship, Fett throws grenades into the air. She stops dead in her tracks and turns the other way, her ship exploding into smithereens as soon as she reaches safety.

Great, she thinks, now we'll have to pay a pilot to get us off this planet.

Han manages to take another one of Fett's crew members down, leaving only Boba Fett and one other bounty hunter, a Togruta woman. As Han faces her down, Padmé is left to deal with Fett, who has his blaster pointed at her head from afar.

"This would be so much easier if Vader wanted you dead," Boba Fett growls in frustration.

Padmé tightens her hand around her blaster, furrowing her brows. "Vader hired you?"

Not only was there a bounty on her head, but he had *specifically* assigned Boba Fett to find her. She knows that she shouldn't be surprised.

Fett gives her a slight nod in response. But then before Padmé can react, he presses a button on his wrist, and a wire projects from the panel. She is able to move out of the way to avoid both of her legs being tied together, but the wire hooks around her ankle and she falls to the ground anyway, her blaster clattering beside her.

As Padmé tries to get up, Boba Fett grabs her by the hair and yanks it to hold her in place. The nerves on her scalp begin to scream, but Padmé refuses to cry out in pain. She won't give Fett the satisfaction.

"Boba, I thought Vader said we weren't supposed to hurt her!" shouts the female bounty hunter, who is crouched behind a crate, still in a gunfight with Han.

"Technically," Boba Fett replies, "he said 'not a scratch.'"

Suddenly, blaster fire sounds and the grip on her hair instantly releases. Padmé flinches at the noise, but wastes no time to grab her blaster and whirl around to see that Han has shot Boba Fett in the head, and now his comrade is firing profusely at him.

"*You*—rebel scum!" she snarls, pointing her blaster at Han's forehead. But those were her last words before Padmé shot her in the chest, unwilling to risk her anger driving her to kill Han.

She feels a pang of guilt against her heart for the blood that had been spilled today. But it was the bounty hunter or Han—it had been an easy choice.

Han sighs in relief and gives her a nod. "Thanks, sister," he says. "That was a close one."

"I really hope that slicer of yours is worth it, Han," Padmé replies with a shake of her head. This is a *disaster*—not only is their ship gone, but now they have to clean up bodies.

When he arrived to one of the meeting rooms in the *Devastator*, Agent Fallon and Doctor Aphra were waiting for him.

Darth Vader stood across from them, silent at first. But it was not long before he began their meeting by saying, “I was unaware that Doctor Aphra was joining us, Agent Fallon.”

Although Agent Fallon maintained his seamless composure, Vader could feel his discomfort rippling through the Force. “My apologies, Lord Vader. I didn’t realize.”

Agent Fallon shoots a very disappointed Aphra a look, and then she exits through the doorway without a word.

“My lord, I assure you that Aphra can be trusted,” says Agent Fallon. “She’s loyal to me, and to you by extension. Besides, she admires you.”

Vader isn’t sure what to make of what Agent Fallon has told him; she admires him? He is not often admired, but rather feared. Hated. Scorned.

He doesn’t dislike Doctor Aphra, but he doesn’t trust her. Vader has learned not to put his complete faith in many people, not even in Agent Fallon. And especially not in the Emperor, his master—not anymore. Although Vader does trust Agent Fallon to complete his missions and not betray him, he would not reveal his deepest secrets to him. He knows that Fallon’s loyalty to him is born out of fear; only his intimidation keeps him in line.

“Perhaps,” is all he decides to reply with. “But let us address your mission, Agent Fallon.”

Fallon gives him a nod. “Of course, my lord.”

“I have two tasks for you,” Vader begins. “I want you to seek out the best doctors in the galaxy. Specifically, those who specialize in reconstructive surgery.”

He can sense Agent Fallon’s curiosity, but the man is wise enough not to pry.

“As for the second task, you will travel to Naboo,” he continues. “If you have been keeping up with the Empire’s bounties, I am sure you know who Padmé Amidala is.”

“Yes, my lord, I’ve seen the wanted notices. She’s the rebel general,” Agent Fallon replies.

Vader knows that the mission he is about to assign Agent Fallon is a bit odd; he almost can’t assign it without giving away some of his intentions. He needs to absolutely confirm that Luke Skywalker is his son. A DNA test isn’t possible, and neither is asking Padmé—if she would even tell him the truth—so he would have to seek out another option.

“Amidala was once the Queen of Naboo, and then a senator. After the rise of the Empire, she faked her death,” Vader explains. “There was a public funeral that displayed a decoy, possibly a synthetic body.”

He can feel Agent Fallon’s curiosity morph into concern. Vader doesn’t bother to try to look into his mind, as his thoughts are always heavily guarded, but he imagines, with slight amusement, that Fallon is praying he doesn’t have to dig up a grave.

“The body appeared to be pregnant, as Amidala was at the time of her presumed death. I need you to find the man who prepared the body for burial—he may be able to confirm

whether she had the child or not,” Vader goes on. “Torture him if you have to; I care not for your methods. I only care about the result. Bring me a recording of what he tells you.”

Agent Fallon’s mind is swimming with questions, but he voices none of them. Instead, he says to Vader, “My lord, may I suggest that you send Aphra on the second mission? It would benefit you to have both of us working for you, and the tasks would be done twice as fast. Besides, she’s much better at torture than I am—she has a droid programmed for it, too.”

Vader considers Fallon’s suggestion carefully. He is reluctant to accept, even though he knows that Agent Fallon has a point. Aphra *could* be useful; she had successfully worked with Fallon before to bring him the name of the rebel pilot. But still, Vader has his doubts.

“If I agree to this, her failure is on *your* head,” Vader informs him. “And I assume you know what failing me means.”

Agent Fallon gulps, but his anxiety doesn’t spike as much as Vader thought it would. Perhaps he is very confident in his comrade’s abilities, then.

“Doctor Aphra is more than capable to complete the mission, my lord,” says Agent Fallon.

Vader nods—he hadn’t thought that Agent Fallon would persist after the threat he gave him. But he would allow Fallon to wager his own life.

“Very well then, Agent Fallon.”